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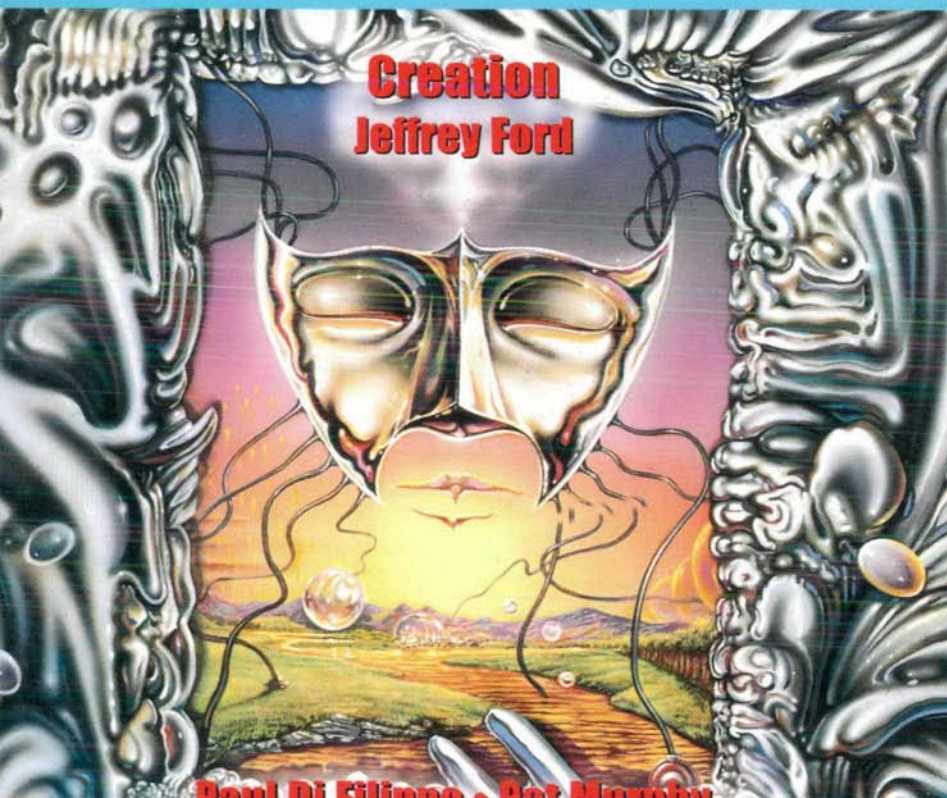

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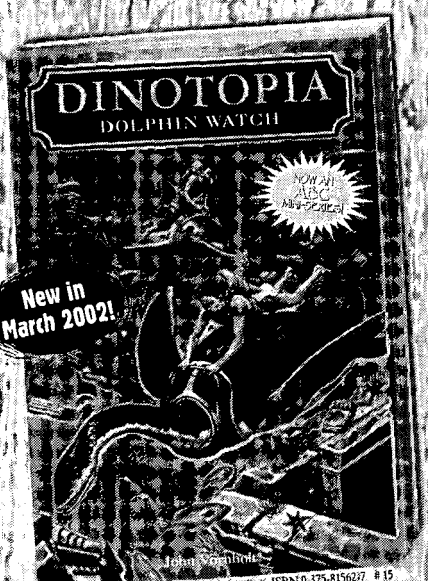

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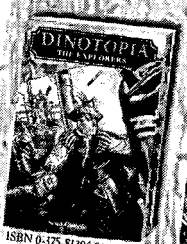

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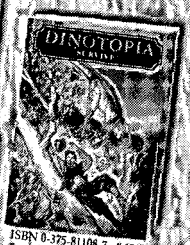

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COVER BY RON WALOTSKY FOR "THE MASK OF THE REX"

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When a reviewer for Locus Online *listed Mr. Di Filippo as one of the ten best short fiction writers at work today, Paul responded by spoofing the whole list (including his own work). Such is the irreverent nature of his talent.*

Restless and prodigious it is, too: Paul reports that in addition to his recent story collection Strange Trades, *he has no less than* five *books due out this year: a dark fantasy novel called* A Mouthful of Tongues, *a novella entitled* One Year in the Linear City, *a collection of short fiction by the name of* Babylon Sisters and Other Posthumans, *another novel,* Spondulix *(expanded from the novella of the same name), and a collection of fantasy stories entitled* Little Doors.

In recent months, we've had some unusual narrators in these pages, including a linguistic worm... but nobody yet has held a candle to the one Paul Di Filippo introduces here:

The Short Ashy Afterlife of Hiram P. Dottle

By Paul Di Filippo

THE HEAD OF THE SPIKE BITES deep into the hard substance of my body, and the man's blunt teeth grip the lower part of my anatomy with compulsive, fearful force. The spike supports me, while my body in turn supports the man's entire weight. He's a small, dumpy fellow, to be sure, but still the strain on me is considerable. Relying thus on a small piece of rusty hardware for our lives, both of us dangle over five stories of empty space, the cobbled street far below us a rain-slick bumpy surface lit by a few dim streetlights casting golden pools of luminance.

My body feels as if it's going to come apart at any moment. For the first time in this new form I feel true pain. Even the birthing blades, the planes and chisels and sandpaper, and the subsequent daily flames applied to my skin offered no sensations such as this.

Oh my goodness, I think wildly, how did I ever come to such a bizarre fate?

And just then the gunshot rings out.

* * *

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My name is Hiram P. Dottle, and once upon a time I enjoyed a quiet easy life, full of cerebral and sensual pleasures of a mild nature. No guns or danger intruded then into my reclusive private sphere. But all of that security and somnolence ended with the arrival of Sparky Flint.

But I rush ahead of my story. More of this temptress soon enough.

Although not born to great wealth, at the time my tale commences I was living comfortably on a guaranteed income, having retired in early middle age from my career as an accountant. I owed my good fortune to the demise of an elderly and well-off maiden aunt in Crescent City: Denise K. Sinkel, formerly of the Massachusetts Sinkels. Her will left everything to "my nephew, Hiram, the only one who always remembered his lonely old aunt at Christmas."

This statement was accurate, even down to poor Aunt Denise's famous self-pity. My contribution to Aunt Denise's good cheer was, I fear, minimal, and offered me as much pleasure as it did her. I always saw to it that Aunt Denise's house was graced with several handmade wreaths and garlands, as well as a few poinsettia plants during the holidays. Riding the bus myself from Central City to its urban neighbor, I kept careful watch over the homemade wreaths and personally cultivated plants resting securely in overhead stowage, never relaxing my vigilance until the cabbie deposited me safely at Aunt Denise's.

Horticulture and flower arranging, you see, were my hobbies. You'd probably never guess it from looking at me, but accounting was never my real love, merely a safe and reliable means of earning my income. Mother and Father both insisted that I turn my adult hand to some low-risk mode of employment promising a small if steady return. So I reluctantly discarded my typical childhood fascination with such icons of daring exploration as Lowell Thomas, Frank Buck and Richard Halliburton — why, today I can hardly believe the youthful dreams I had, involving travel to exotic climes and battle with wild animals and savage natives! — and when I reached my early maturity I enrolled at Keating's School of Accountancy.

Thirty years later Mother and Father had long ago passed away, deeding me the ancestral home where I still occupied my boyhood room. The property consisted of a well-kept but fading Victorian manse set on five acres of land in a neighborhood rather fallen, if you'll permit the pun,

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to seed. This surprising legacy descended on an asocial bachelor who in the morning mirror seemed undressed without his green celluloid eyeshade and sleeve garters. Having perused enough ledgers and balance sheets to build a tower to the Moon — had I cared to indulge in such fanciful behavior — I was more than ready to put my career behind and plunge more deeply into my passions.

The redeeming moments in what I confess most people would categorize as a boring life occurred in my garden. In the suburbs of Central City, my property, through diligent and loving application, had been ultimately turned into a miniature Versailles, replete with espaliers, pollarded aisles and substantial fountains. I venture to say that not even the immaculately landscaped grounds of Idlewhile Cemetery (I am naturally excluding that spooky and mysteriously overgrown portion in the northwest corner) could compete on a foot-by-foot basis with my land. Why, the neighborhood children, dirty urchins all, frequently congregated at my fence to gape in awe. At least I assumed their emotions were respectful, although several times I thought to detect an out-thrust tongue swiftly withdrawn when I turned to face them. No matter, though, for I was content.

After Aunt Denise's independence-granting demise, I enjoyed four whole luxurious years of complete devotion to gardening. My joyful days were filled with propagating and repotting, grafting and staking, double-digging and turf-laying. I managed the funds that had so unexpectedly become mine with care and wisdom, investing them in U.S. Treasury Bonds at a solid one-and-a-half percent annual return. Combined with my own personal savings, this interest income satisfied all my simple needs. Although I admit I did once boldly dip into some of the capital to secure a new wheelbarrow, a toolshed, and some fine handwrought British tools.

Including, in a magnificent example of life's irony, the well-honed axe that killed me.

You will have gathered by my small clues that an unexpected climacteric occurred in my life shortly after my inheritance. That deadly turning point consisted of my meeting the irresistible Sparky Flint.

I can't say now what came over me that fatal night. Some Imp of the Perverse took hold of my lapels and whispered evil urgings into my ear. To be short about it, I developed an instant but avid craving for a spot of sherry.

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Aunt Denise had always treated me to a small annual glass of sherry upon completion of my decorating her house. After ten years of the ritual I grew accustomed to the taste, and actually came to look forward to the uncommon indulgence. Now, four years without tasting a drop of sherry and my quiescent desires suddenly came to a head. I felt an unquenchable thirst that only strong drink could satisfy. So I set out with grim determination for a saloon.

The trolley dropped me off downtown. Walking the unfamiliar nighted streets of Central City, I tried to gauge which establishment might prove most suitable for a gentleman of my retiring nature.

Unfortunately, my instincts were flawed. I ended up entering a most ungenteel "dive."

The "joint" was packed with smoking, sweating, cursing, laughing humanity, their voices echoing off the garish walls and grimy ceiling. I felt like a frightened cow amidst his ignorant bovine peers on the abattoir walkway.

Nonetheless my unnatural compulsions for the fruit of the vine still held sway. I worked my way toward the bar, past lap-seated trollops hoisting foamy mugs of beer to their lips and brawny laborers knocking back "boilermakers."

At the bar I secured my drink, enduring a sneer or two at my uncommon choice of beverage from my immediate neighbors and even from the bartender himself, an ugly bruiser. I rested one foot on the brass rail, in imitation of my fellow imbibers, but the stance felt too unsteady, and I moved off to a small empty table.

And then the singing began.

Supernal, sirenical singing like nothing I had ever heard before, as if hundreds of calla lilies had suddenly taken voice.

I suppose the mode employed by this diabolically angelic female voice might have been termed "torchsong." If so, the metaphor was apt, since my whole soul was enflamed by the unseen songstress. No doubt the alcohol coursing wildly through my veins played its part as well.

I stood up instinctively in an attempt to spot the singer and was rewarded by sight of a small, lighted stage. And there she stood, microphone in hand.

Sparky Flint.

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Her hair a tumbling mass of poppy-red curls, her cosmetic-enhanced face brazenly sensuous, her Junoesque figure wrapped in a tight jade evening dress, the singer caressed each syllable of her lustful song in a way that delivered the words like vernal osmosis straight to my heart.

I remained standing for the exotic chanteuse's entire hypnotic performance, learning her name only when a coarse emcee ushered her off the stage.

Collapsing back into my seat, I downed the remaining inch of my sherry in one dynamic swallow. And as I set the glass down, my eyes confronted the satin-swaddled bosom of Sparky Flint herself.

"Mind if I pull up a chair, honey?"

"Nuh-no, nuh-not at all."

She took up her seat so closely to mine that our knees almost touched, and I could see the very weave of her silk stockings where they caressed her ankle above the strap of her shoe. Conquering the reek of spilled ale and tobacco and human musk, a whiff of her sharp synthetic floral scent carried to my nostrils. The barroom seemed to spin in circles about me.

"Care to buy a girl a drink, sport?"

"I—that is—why, certainly." I tried to adopt a dapper manner. "I fear I must have misplaced my manners in my other suit."

I summoned a barmaid and Sparky ordered a cocktail unfamiliar to me. Once she had refreshed her tired vocal cords, she fixed me with an inquisitive yet friendly stare.

"I never had no guy stand up for my whole show before. Most of these bums wouldn't know if the management had a hyena cackling up there. You musta really liked my singing, huh?"

"Why, yes, most assuredly. Such dulcet yet thrilling tones have never before laved my ears."

Sparky drained her drink and began toying with a toothpick-pierced olive. "You're a regular charmer, fella. Say, what's your name?"

"Hiram. Hiram P. Dottle."

"Well, Hiram, let me let you in on a little secret. A lady likes to be appreciated for her talents, you know. She can get mighty friendly with the right guy, if he shows a little gen-u-wine interest. And even though I've got a swell set of pipes, that ain't all the assets Sparky Flint's got hidden. Say, speaking of assets — why doncha tell me a little more about yourself."

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I gulped, swallowing some kind of sudden lump big as an iris corm, and began to recount my life history. Sparky brightened considerably when I described my home, and became positively overwrought when I detailed the clever way I had invested Aunt Denise's money. By this point she was practically sitting in my lap, and I confess that I had indulged in two more glasses of sherry.

"Oh, Dottie, you've led such a fascinating life! You don't mind if I call you Dottie, do you?"

No one had ever employed such a diminuitive variant of my name before. But then again, never had I established such a quick bond with any female of the species. "Why, I — "

"I thought you'd be jake with that! You're such a broad-minded character. Did anyone ever tell you that your mustache is so attractively wispy, Dottie? I bet it tickles just like a caterpillar when you kiss."

And then to test her proposition, she planted her lips directly upon mine, in the most thrilling moment of my life, comparable only to my success in breeding a pure-white pansy, a feat written up as a sidebar in *Horticulture Monthly*.

We were married one month later. Only upon securing the marriage license did I learn Sparky Flint's birthname. Christened Maisie Grumbach, she had been raised in Central City's orphanage, and possessed no kin of any degree.

"A girl on her own's gotta be fast on her feet, Dottie. I learned that early on at the orphanage. When it's slopping time at the hog trough, the slow piglet goes to bed hungry. The main chance just don't linger. Grab what you can, when you can — that's Sparky Flint's motto."

The first six months of our marriage offered all the connubial and domestic joys imaginable. Sparky lavished her affections on me. If I could blush in my present state I certainly would, to recall how she twisted her "little Dottie-wottie" around her slim fingers, with honeyed words and lascivious attentions. And all the while, behind her facade of love lurked the heartless viper of greed and treachery.

The first rift in our romance developed when I proposed to spend one thousand dollars to put in an elaborate carp pond. I realized that this constituted a large sum, but felt justified in devoting this amount to my harmless hobby. After all, hadn't I given Sparky the elaborate wedding she

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desired, spending liberally on her gown and jewelry, as well as providing a feast for those few guests we could summon up between us? (Sparky's friends I found rather unsavory, and spent as little time with them as possible.)

"Ten Ben Franklins on a fishing hole!" shrieked Sparky, abusing her nightingale's throat most horridly. "And I haven't had a new pair of shoes in a month! What the hell are you thinking? Do I look like the kind of dame who prefers sardines to high heels?"

"But Sparky, dear — "

"Fuhgeddaboutit!"

Our marital situation deteriorated rapidly from that point on, as if a plug had been pulled on a greasy watertower full of ill feelings that now drained over us. Accusations, vituperations, insinuations — these replaced whispered endearments and fond embraces on Sparky's part. My share of these increasingly frequent arguments consisted of silence and a hangdog expression, followed by contrite agreement. Nevertheless, unplacated, my wife began spending inordinate amounts of time away from home, frequently returning only after I had finished my nine o'clock snack of milk and common crackers and turned out the lights for sleep.

The final straw apparently came with a most unwise and unannounced expenditure on my part. I had learned by now not to advertise in advance my horticultural expenditures. Consequently, the delivery of lumber, cast iron fittings and sheets of glass sufficient to construct a charming Edwardian greenhouse took Sparky completely by surprise.

She had the tact to wait until the deliverymen left before laying into me, although judging by the mottling of her complexion the restraint had nearly caused her to burst a vein.

"What the hell *is* all this, buster! Are you out of your everlovin' mind? Your wife is walking around in rags, and you're blowing through my inheritance like a dipso through free muscatel!"

I tried to divert her anger by joshing. "Oh, come now, dear. You have a sturdy and healthy husband not much older than you yourself. Surely it's premature to be speaking of my unlikely demise and your grieving widowhood."

A look of pure vicious hatred such as I had never before seen on a human visage passed fleetingly across Sparky's beautiful features, to be

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replaced by a composed mask of indifference. "Oh, too early is it? Maybe — and maybe not...."

Her words and expression alarmed me to such a degree that I shrugged quickly into my ratty old puttering-about cardigan, murmured something about attending to a fungus problem, and hastened outside.

Kneeling at the base of a large, mistletoe-festooned oak tree, I was delicately aerating the soil around its roots with a small tool when I heard someone approaching. I looked over my shoulder and saw a horrifying sight.

My loving wife Sparky, hoisting high my fine British axe in her gloved hands.

Struck mute, paralyzed, I could only listen helplessly to her insane rehearsal of some future speech for an unknown audience.

"This is an absolutely *awful* neighborhood, officer. I've noticed tramps and vagrants and petty thieves lurking around our estate ever since my poor dead husband brought me here as his blushing bride. One of them must have finally broken in. I'm sure my husband died defending my virtue."

"No, Sparky, no!" I finally managed to croak.

Too late, for the axe was already descending.

In my fading eyesight, filled totally with a closeup landscape of bark, I watched my own blood jet and pool in a hollow formed by two intersecting oak roots.

Then all went black.

THE ASTONISHING RETURN of my consciousness at first brought with it no sensory data, aside from a sense of well-being and wholeness. For an indefinite leisurely time I basked in the simple absence of the shattering pain that had accompanied Sparky's treacherous assault. The utter blackness and lack of sound in my current environment failed to frighten me. I felt too much at ease, too peaceful. I could only conclude that some good Samaritan had rescued me from my wife's attack in time to save my life, and that now I rested in a cozy hospital bed, guarded by watchful nurses and doctors, my eyes and ears bandaged, my healing body suffused with morphine.

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The closest I approached to worrying about my old life was a vague feeling that certainly some drastic changes would have to be engineered in my spousal relations, once I fully recovered. Perhaps even a trial separation.

Then, after this period of idle, happy musing, odd, subliminal sensations began to filter into my consciousness. I seemed to register light striking me, but in a new fashion. Sunlight seemed to be impinging upon my "skin" and "face" in a whole-body manner, as if I were — horrors! — utterly unclothed at the beach. Discordant, jagged images swept over me. Likewise, I perceived the ambient soundscape in a novel, jumbled manner. Oddest of all though were fresh tactile impressions. I experienced a contradictory feeling of compression and extension, as if I were stuffed into a closet, yet simultaneously stretched on a not-uncomfortable rack.

Likewise, my sense of time's passage had altered. Objective minutes, gauged by the fragmentary movements of the sun, seemed to drip by like hours.

I used this extended realm of time wisely, and by the end of what must have been a single day, I had thoroughly integrated my new senses so that I could see and hear and feel in a coherent way.

From my new immovable vantage I enjoyed a three-hundred-and-sixty degree omniscient view of some very familiar landscaped grounds. And when I focused my "sight" in one particular direction, I saw my ancestral home standing forlorn and dark. Triangulating my position by landmarks, I could no longer deny the obvious conclusion.

My soul now inhabited the very oak tree at whose foot I had been slaughtered. I was now a male dryad, if such a creature were possible.

Acknowledging this impossible truth, I directed my vision and other senses downward. My human body had been carted away, but my sticky blood still filled the hollow where it had gushed. Alarmingly, I experienced a feeling of oakish satisfaction at this extra-rich watering, as if grateful for my pagan due. Apparently, the original spirit of the oak still to some degree overlapped mine, offering its old perceptions.

Well, this was a fine fix, I thought. My old life had reached a premature conclusion, and such comforting rituals as milk and common crackers availed naught. But questioning the miracle would be futile, and I would

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simply have to learn to inhabit my new body and enjoy this mode of existence.

Surprisingly, the transition came quite easily.

By dawn of the next day, approximately forty-eight or seventy-two hours after my murder, I was already happy in my arboreal magnificence.

All my nurturing of this tree had prepared a veritable temple for my spirit. My roots stretched deeply down and out into nutritious, stable soil, while my crown of efficient leaves reared high into the welcoming sky. My inner flesh was strong and healthy, my limbs proud and free of disease. Birds and squirrels nested in my niches, providing gay company, while sun and rain stoked my slow engines. Ants crawling up and down me tickled and massaged and warred with insidious insects that would have harmed me. Like some Hindoo holyman, I experienced an absolute contentment with my condition, free of unsatisified desires, my mind at one with ancient cosmic imperatives.

But then came a disturbing incident that awoke my human side.

Out of my old house stepped Sparky Flint, my murderous wife.

And with her was a man!

Tall and impressively muscled, clad in a dark suit and crisp fedora, the fellow strolled alongside Sparky with a sober yet irrepressibly jaunty air. I instantly assessed him as ten times the physical specimen I had ever been (although of course compared to my current girth and strength he was pitiful), and I felt complete jealousy toward this new suitor.

But then as the pair approached and I spotted the small mask guarding the stranger's identity, I recognized him and my feelings flipflopped instantly.

This was the Shade! Central City's daring crimefighter, champion of the oppressed and wronged, had come personally to investigate and avenge my murder!

I focused my "hearing" on Sparky and the Shade, a small matter of forming a parabolic cone with certain of my leaves.

"I wish I had returned from my affairs in China a day or two earlier," said the Shade, "before Klink and his boys completely obliterated this lawn. Look at this mess! Those flatfoots might've been playing a duffer's round of golf, the lawn's so hacked up. Any clues to the identity of your husband's killer are long gone."

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For the first time I noted the terrible condition of the lawn. What the Shade had observed was true. I regretted I would not be able to roll out and reseed in my current state.

Attired in widow's weeds, a veil floating across her devilishly beautiful features, Sparky sniffled with touching, albeit insincere sympathy. "Poor Dottie! He was ever so prideful of his whole garden. Sometimes in fact I think he loved it more than me...."

Not so! I wanted to shout. *Well, perhaps...*, honesty instantly forced me to amend.

The Shade regarded Sparky with a natural compassion, tempered, I thought, only by those common suspicions that attach to the spouse of any murdered husband. "There, there, Mrs. Dottle. I know it's small comfort, but we'll eventually catch the fiend who did this."

"That's what I pray for each night before I climb into my lonely empty bed, Mister Shade, where I writhe and squirm feverishly until dawn." Sparky gripped the Shade's right bicep in an overfamiliar manner and fluttered her long lashes at him.

The Shade appeared a trifle flustered. "Ahem, yes. Now, let me just have a look at this tree."

Crouching at my base, the Shade produced a magnifying lens and examined my bark. With one gloved finger he took up a few flakes of my rain-washed and sun-dried blood. He cogitated a moment, then stood.

"I would've thought a man startled by an axe-bearing assailant might have made a dash for his life, or at least clawed at the tree where he kneeled in an attempt to scramble upright. Yet he died without a scuffle right where you earlier saw him working."

Unwisely perhaps, Sparky vented her residual hatred. "Dottie was a meek little shrimp!" Hastily, she recovered. "That is, my husband had a mild disposition. He must've fainted straight away when the awful thug came on him."

"Yes, that's one explanation. Well, Mrs. Dottle, there's not a lot I can do here. I'll be going now."

"Oh, please, Mister Shade, just walk me back to the house. I can't stand to be alone near this tree. There's something creepy about it now, since my husband died."

As the Shade and Sparky retreated, she cast a dire look back at me,

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almost as if she could see her husband sheltering inside his oaken suit.

Once the pair were out of sight, I found myself sinking down into blissful vegetal somnolence again. The happy sensations of being an oak completely wiped away any mortal cares left over from my prior life. Why should I trouble myself about human justice? My old life would never be restored through the courts. Let the fleshly ones squabble among themselves. Their little lives had no impact on mine.

My arrogant invulnerability lasted for roughly a year. Through summer, fall and winter I gloried undisturbed in the magnificence of my being, experiencing each turning season with new joy.

But then in the spring came my comeuppance. I had been much too cavalier in dismissing Sparky's ability to do me further harm.

One day near the anniversary of my murder, a second set of killers arrived to slay me once again.

I witnessed the truck from Resneis Arborists pass through the gates of my small estate and down the drive. Improbably and most uncivilly, it actually continued up onto my prize lawn, the turf now looking admittedly less than perfect due to lack of attention. Rough-handed workers tumbled out, and a foreman began to shout orders.

"Okay, you jokers, get a move on! We've got to take down every tree on this property plenty pronto, if we want that bonus. And the big oak goes first!"

Horrified, I watched two men pull a huge saw from their truck and start toward me.

I could feel the big sharp teeth placed harshly against my barky skin.

The first rasping cut produced a dull agony. The second, deeper stroke sent fiery alarm signals down my every fiber.

I could feel my consciousness pulling instinctively back from the pain. I had an impulse to gather myself into the deepest core of my being, to escape the torture.

But before I lost touch with the outer world, I caught the arrival of Sparky and a brutish-looking stranger dressed in a suit with roguishly wide lapels. I forced myself to focus on their *sotto voce* dialogue, as they conversed in what they deemed utter secrecy.

"I gotta hand it to ya, Sparky baby," said the thug. "This land is gonna make a swell spot for Central City's new casino. But ain't'cha being a bit,

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well, pre-ma-tour with the choppin' an' the bulldozin' an' all? The permits an' licenses from City Hall ain't exactly a shoe-in. Mayor Nolan ain't too keen on gamblin'. And her copper daddy will bust a gasket if he learns who your backers are."

"You just leave Commissioner Nolan and his brat in City Hall to me, big boy, and concentrate on what you do best."

"Lovin' and killin', right?"

"Right, Jules."

The conniving pair went into a clinch that violated every element of the Hays Code, but I could spare no further attention for their reprehensible licentiousness.

Loud creakings and groanings were issuing from my numb nether regions, which either I or the oak had protectively desensitized. With grave misgivings, I noticed that I was beginning to cant and tip.

My ultimate downfall followed swiftly. The final fibers holding me upright parted, and I crashed toward the ground. The thundering impact was titanic, and I lost consciousness for some time. When I came to, I could feel my proud branches being lopped. In short time I was hoisted by a newly arrived crane onto an accompanying flatbed truck and carted off.

Huddling deep inside myself, I realized then that my fate most likely involved a quick trip to the sawmill and a swift transition into planks.

But such was not the case. Apparently I was destined for stranger ends.

Whether subconsciously or not, Sparky had chosen a fate for my wooden corpse meant to humiliate. Even in death I would be denied utilitarian dignity.

When I felt a cessation of motion, I pooled my dwindling organic energies and tried to apprehend my destination. I saw a sign that read CENTRAL CITY SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN, and quickly intuited my ignominious lot: to become practice billets for budding, ham-fisted sculptors. The best I could hope for was to grace a tobacco shop as a clumsy wooden Indian.

Sure enough, I was trundled into the school's carpentry shop and, once callously stripped of my bark, rapidly dismembered into several largish sections of trunk. With each cut I pulled my ectoplasmic bits of

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mental being out of the severed section, retreating and retreating, until finally, with the last slice, I found all my fading identity concentrated in one portion of trunk.

For a long time I existed only in a state resembling hibernation, as I cured in a storeroom. What became of my nonsentient bits I cannot tell. After an unguessable duration, the portion housing my ghostly self, roused by motion, eventually rode a dolly to the atelier of a youth possessed of handsome Mediterranean looks and clad in leather apron and work gloves. I heard him addressed as "Gino" by the delivery men.

Gino wrestled me upright into position on a platform, then stepped back to survey me. "Hmm, I see hidden in this dumb wood a straining heroic figure, fighting against injustice. Perhaps I'll call this masterpiece 'Samson Rages Against the Philistines.'"

Much as I appreciated Gino's noble goals for my dessicated flesh, I still cringed to imagine the first blow of his chisel. Trying to avoid his blow, I concentrated my essence far away from his anticipated strike. But then, at the last moment, he shifted position and cleaved off that very block of matter containing all my soul!

I fell to the floor, ignored in the white heat of artistic creation.

But at day's end, to my surprise, Gino picked me up and carried me home.

The young sculptor lived in an Italian slum on the far side of Central City. Apparently he shared his dismal cold water flat only with his father, a cheerful old fellow with an aura of deep wisdom about him.

"Poppa, look," Gino called out as soon as he entered. "Some raw material for your hobby."

Gino's father took me in his rough hands. How humiliating, I thought. From Hiram P. Dottle, bookkeeper, botanist, and husband, to mighty oak to hunk of kindling. The old man turned me over and over, examining me with a keen eye before finally speaking.

"It's-a not fine Algerian brier, Gino, like-a what-a we had back in Napoli. But the grain, she's a-fine. Maybe Mario Deodati can make-a one nice pipe out of this scrap."

"Thataboy, Pop! Go to it!"

Thus began my final metamorphosis, under the magically skilled hands of Mario Deodati. Pared away with patient cunning, the block

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revealed the shape hiding within it. And amazingly, as Mario lavished attention and craft and even love on me, I felt my identity taking renewed strength.

Holding my still-chunky form at one point, Mario spoke to me, his creation. "I see a face in-a you, Mister Pipe. I'm a-make your bowl into a smiling head."

Good as his word, Mario carved facial features into his creation. I had no mirror to observe myself in, but I could feel from inside that my new visage was perhaps overly jolly and gleeful in the manner of a Toby jug. Mario's sensitivity as to my true nature extended only so far.

One day in late winter, when the winds rattled the loose, rag-stuffed windows in the apartment, Mario and Gino had a terse, painful discussion which I observed and listened to from my perch on a shelf.

"It's no use, Pop. I'm going to have to quit school. We don't even have the money for coal and groceries, never mind my tuition."

Mario banged the table with the hand that had birthed me. "Did me and your sainted Momma teach-a you to be a quitter! You gonna stay in school, boy!" He struggled to his feet and snatched me down off the shelf. "Go sell this! And get-a the best price you can!"

Wrapped in an old piece of flannel, I left my latest home.

I surmised that it was now nearly a year since I had been felled, and my fate once more loomed obscure.

Five stores later, a deal was consummated. I changed hands for the princely sum of one hundred dollars, enough to keep the Deodatis afloat for several months, and I silently bade farewell to Gino.

My new owner was a portly bearded punctilious gentleman in vest and suit. The tip of his tongue protruding absentmindedly from the corner of his compressed lips, he inked a pricetag in the amount of two hundred dollars, tied it to my stem with string, and placed me on a velvet cushion in a display case. That night, when the shop lights clicked off and only stray glints from street lamps illuminated my new home, I tried to communicate somehow with my new neighbors. But they failed to respond to the most vigorous of my psychic efforts, and I realized I was the only sensate pipe amongst them. Internally, I shed a self-pitying tear or two as I contemplated my sad lot.

The next few weeks established a boring routine of shop-opening,

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commercial traffic, shop-closing and a long night of despair. I was handled and admired several times, but never purchased.

But one day my salvation arrived, in the form of two famous customers.

The well-dressed and decorously glamorous woman with her twin rolls of blonde hair pinned high atop her head appeared first in my field of vision. Lowering her half-familiar happy face to the glass separating us, she spoke. "Oh, Shade, look! Isn't that model with the carved face just darling?"

The masked visage of the Shade manifested next to the woman's. In context, I recognized her now as Mayor Ellen Nolan. The Shade did not seem to share all of Ellen Nolan's enthusiasm. His manly features wrinkled in quizzical bemusement.

"Gee, Ellen, I've seen better mugs on plug-uglies from the Gasworks Gang! And two hundred dollars! Do you realize how many orphans we could feed with that money?"

"Don't be such a wet blanket, Shade. Spending a little extra of my personal money on Daddy's birthday won't send any orphans to bed hungry."

The Shade lifted his hat and skritched his scalp. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Ellen? How are you going to get Nolan to give up his favorite old stinkpot in favor of this one anyhow?"

"Simple. I'll hide it."

A whistle of admiration escaped the Shade's lips. "And the newspapers say *I've* got guts! Well, I leave it all up to you."

"A wise decision. Sir, we'll take this one. And wrap it nicely, please."

Into a dark box I went. The crinkle of folding giftpaper and the zip of cellotape from a dispenser was followed by careful placement into what I presume was a handled shopping bag. I guessed by the long stride I subsequently shared that the Shade next carried me home to Ellen's house. I heard the smack of a kiss upon a cheek, then felt further lifting movements, ending up, I supposed, hidden in a closet.

The routine of the house for the next day or so quickly became aurally familiar. The gruff yet loving Commissioner Nolan arrived home and left at odd hours of the day, while the perky but forceful Mayor Nolan held to a more regular schedule. The Shade popped up unpredictably.

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Finally one special morning, muffled in my closet I could hear Ellen's father ranting, turning the air blue with his curses.

"*Where* could that dangblasted, consarned *pipe* of mine have *gotten* to! Ellen! Ellen! ELLEN!"

"Yes, Daddy, whatever's the matter?"

"My favorite pipe! I can't find it! I'm certain I left it on the bedstand when I went to sleep, but now it's missing! How can I go to work without it?"

Footsteps approached me, a door creaked open, and I was lifted down in my package. Ellen's sweet voice soothed her father. "Well, I haven't the foggiest notion of where you've mislaid that awful thing. But luckily enough, I have this little gift right here. Happy Birthday, Daddy!"

My wrapping began to rip. "Grmph. Hmph. Frazzleblast it!"

"Let me give you a hand, Daddy dear."

The light of day made me metaphysically squint. I found myself face to face with a choleric, jaw-grinding Commissioner Nolan. The three patches of white hair on his otherwise bald head were mussed and flyaway.

He scowled at me, and I knew we had not hit it off.

"Is this a kid's bubblepipe? What am I supposed to pack it with — cornsilk?"

Ellen began tenderly to stroke her father's hair into better order. "Come on now, don't be a gruff old bear. This pipe has a hundred times more class than your old one. Won't you at least try it, please — for me?"

Nolan turned me around so I faced away from him. Then for the first time I felt the curiously intimate sensation of his blunt teeth biting down strongly on my stem. His irritation caused me to waggle furiously up and down almost in time to his thumping, agitated pulse, so much so that I feared for his dangerously high blood pressure.

"Feels strange," Nolan said. "Not like my old one."

"New things take some getting used to. Here's your tobacco pouch. Smoke up a bowl or two and you'll see how lovely it is."

Nolan stuffed my wooden head full of pungent weed, tamping the plug down with a blunt, nicotine-stained thumb. Then I heard a match scrape and felt the small flame singe my crown. The pain was less than if I had tested my human flesh with a match, and I resolved to be stoic in my new role.

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Puffing furiously, Nolan seemed to relax a trifle. "Draws well enough," he cautiously admitted. "But that simpering little face on the bowl — "

"Shush now! Off to work with you!"

Nolan snatched up a battered old leather satchel and exited. A police car and driver awaited him outside, and we set off.

Well, I cannot begin to describe the tremendous excitement of the subsequent several weeks. I experienced firsthand the glamorous crimefighting life of the Shade and Nolan in a way no one else ever had, not even the Shade's loyal Negro sidekick, Busta! Never absent from Nolan's pitbull-like mandibular embrace, I found myself swept up in innumerable thrilling confrontations with the forces of evil. Shootouts, chases, last-minute rescues! Threats, torture, mysterious clues, exotic locales! Villains, henchmen, mad scientists, *femmes fatales!* Why, once I remember we slipped quietly through the slimy, drip-plopping sewers on the trail of the Crustacean, only to discover the archfiend in his lair with —

But I ramble. I'll never reach the end of my personal tale if I recount all the wild adventures I experienced. Suffice it to say that out of my three existences to date, being Commissioner Nolan's trusty pipe proved by far the most invigorating!

Of course, I had to endure many boring meetings as well. Politics played a part in crimefighting, as it did in everything connected with the civic life of Central City. Whenever one of these tedious events was scheduled, I fell into an absentminded reverie. I confess to being in one such fugue at the start of that fatal evening.

The clock in the Mayor's shadowy office struck midnight when the Shade and Ellen walked in, causing my owner to hastily remove his feet from his daughter's desk and leap up from her ornate office chair.

The Shade looked shamefaced. "Sorry we're late. I thought I spotted the wily spy Pola Fleece down by the docks, but it turned out to be only a fashion magazine shoot. It took a while to settle up damages with the photographer and models. Are those slimy business partners here yet?"

Nolan knocked my head on the edge of a trashcan to remove my dead embers, then restuffed me with shag and lit up. I was quite used to the flickering flame by now, and paid it no mind as Nolan began to puff furiously.

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"Not yet. I don't like this, Shade — not one little bit."

Ellen chimed in. "I agree. That Flint woman gives me the willies. What a cold-blooded witch! Only a few months until the second anniversary of her husband's murder, and she's already taking up with another man. Why, I hear she's even carrying his *lovechild!*"

Ellen blushed charmingly at this remark, and the Shade coughed as if he had swallowed a fly.

Sparky? Were they speaking of Sparky? A old twinge of mixed affection and hatred passed through my wooden frame, and I woke into greater alertness.

"And she hasn't snagged just any beau," the Shade added. "Jules 'The Fife' Reefer has a history of misdeeds as long and bloody as the Carnivore's."

Nolan said, "Still, we've never been able to pin anything on him, and this request of theirs to build a casino seems on the up and up."

"I agree they're following legitimate channels," said the Shade, "but the big question remains. Do we want to let Reefer construct such an efficient money-laundering enterprise for his other illegal rackets?"

"Of course not," Ellen said. "But we've stalled them in every legal way we can. There's no way we can avoid giving them the permits for their casino any longer."

The Shade pushed his hat back on his head and smiled. "That's the purpose of tonight's meeting. We've gotten them so frustrated that they're bound to offer you a bribe. Why else would they schedule such a late-night get-together? I'll be in the next office with the door ajar. Once the money is out in the open, I'll bust in and put the cuffs on them. End of story."

Nolan scowled. "I suppose it's the only way. But I don't like putting Ellen at risk."

Ellen straightened up proudly. "I'm the Mayor, Daddy. Don't I deserve my share of the bribe? In fact, I think you and I will have to split it seventy-thirty."

"Hmph! Sixty-forty," joshed Nolan, "and that's my final offer."

Outside in the empty City Hall corridor the elevator bell chimed, signaling the conveyance's arrival on our floor.

The Shade darted for the connecting door. "Stations, men!"

A few seconds later, my ex-wife and her new lover walked in.

Clutching her purse demurely, Sparky looked more desirable than

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ever, with her tumbling Titian curls framing her adorable face. Recalling Ellen's catty gossip, I thought to detect a slight swelling of her tummy, heralding the bastard child, substitute for the offspring we had never managed to conceive between us. I felt myself falling in love all over with her again — until I recalled with a shock the murderously contorted lines of this same visage as she swung the axe at my back.

Her companion — the identical thuggish man I had seen her with while still a tree — I paid little attention to, deeming him beneath my mature consideration. Besides, it was hard to consider myself his vigorous rival while wearing the semblance of a pipe.

Reefer hailed us as if meeting buddies at an amusement park. "Howdy, Mayor, Commissioner! Hope we ain't kept you up past your bedtime. But the deal we got in mind needs a little privacy, heh-heh, if you get my drift."

Sparky kicked Reefer's ankle and took over the pitch, her dulcet voice achingly familiar.

"What my partner means is that we intend tonight to have an end to all delays. Twelve months of red tape have left us feeling very antsy. If there's any way we can, um, grease the wheels of progress, we are quite willing to — "

"Just spit it out, baby. We're ready to lay some serious mazuma down to get this project underway. Whatta we talkin'? Ten thousand? Fifteen thousand?"

I quivered menacingly between Nolan's choppers. If only Sparky and Reefer had been able to read the language of my jiggling, they would have turned tail and run. But they were blind to Nolan's rage.

"Let's see the color of your money, Reefer."

The mobster reached into his suitcoat's inner pocket and hauled out a sheaf of bills weighty as one of my prize cabbages. All eyes except mine were magnetized by the bundle of large denomination bills. Thus only I witnessed the Shade sneak catfootedly up behind Reefer and tap him on the shoulder.

"Jig's up, Reefer. Will you come quietly, or do I have to use force?"

Everyone had forgotten Sparky. Until they heard in the stunned silence the click of the hammer on her .45, loud as my former oaken body crashing to the ground.

Sparky's eyes were hard as her stage name, her face taut with rage.

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"Jules ain't going nowhere. It's you three that are gonna take a little trip."

Even Reefer seemed stunned by his paramour's steely determination. "Put the rod away, baby. We can beat a little bribery rap. It's just their word against ours."

Sparky swung her gun toward the Shade, but addressed Reefer. "Sometimes I swear you've got less spine than that mousy dirtgrubber I married! Win a case against the Shade? Are you crazy? He's got this town sewed up!"

"It's simply a matter of being on the correct side of the law, Miss Flint. Now if you'll just do as your boyfriend advises — "

"Shut up, you! Now, head for the staircase!"

The trio of captives shuffled out — under two guns now — while I was still fuming over the insult Sparky had paid my memory. Once in the stairwell we climbed steadily upward, emerging onto the roof. The summer sky hosted an infinity of stars, as likely to offer us useful help as anyone else in the city.

"Go over near the edge," Sparky commanded. "There's gonna be a little accident here tonight. Three clumsy stargazers are gonna take a little dive. Maybe the papers will even figure the Shade was somehow responsible. When our crew takes over City Hall, we won't have a care in the world."

We now stood at the low parapet protecting us from five stories of oblivion. I could see the Shade tensing his muscles for a lunge. But Sparky anticipated just such an action.

"Jules, grab the girl." Once in Reefer's clutches, Ellen suffered the muzzle of the pistol jammed against her stomach. "Try anything funny, and your girlfriend gets gutshot. It's not as easy a death as a broken neck, believe me."

With surprising acrobatic ease, the lumpy Nolan jumped atop the parapet. "Don't shoot her, Flint. I'm going first."

And with that he jumped, taking me of course with him.

Nolan's blunt fingers gripped the ledge and interrupted our fall. I deduced his plan: to lure Sparky and Reefer over for a look, then make a surprising grab at them with one hand, thus breaking the stalemate. But even in the dim light Sparky must have seen his efforts.

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"Reefer, he's holding on! Turn the girl loose and go whack the old coot's fingers."

I witnessed Reefer above us hefting his own gun, reversed. He smashed the butt down.

Nolan grunted, fell a foot with uselessly waving arms —

— and that was when the protruding spike intercepted my bowl.

Nolan's teeth bit into my stem like a crocodile's.

Reefer called out, "He's hanging on by his damn pipe!"

"Shoot the pipe out of his mouth then!"

Reefer took careful aim —

AND JUST THEN the gunshot rings out, simultaneously with the sound of a scuffle on the rooftop, the thud of fists on flesh, of muffled grunts and screams. The bullet pierces my stem, severing it completely. The pain of my mortal wound wracks me with titanic agonies. I try to hold onto consciousness, but feel it ebbing swiftly. But in my last seconds of full awareness, even as my two halves tumble into the void, I thankfully witness the Shade lunge three-quarters over the edge of the parapet to grab Nolan by his wrist.

Then a familiar mortal darkness descends.

Curiously, unexpectedly, my soul is not completely extinguished. Although split in two, my human essence remains connected by a dormant thread of ectoplasm. Patiently, able to do nothing else, I await the reinvigorating reunion of my halves, a repair I am somehow confident will arrive in due course.

At last the blessed event comes. Jagged lower stem intersects with upper fragment and bowl, firmly secured with a spot of Elmer's glue. Although certainly unfit to be smoked, I can still exercise thought and perception.

I find myself stapled to a plaque, hanging on a wall beneath an odd circular skylight. Weirdly, the view through the cross-barred aperture reveals not mere sky, but an eerie nighted landscape of canted tombstones.

I am underground! And where else but in the Shade's fabled but never-pinpointed sanctum, its location now disclosed to me alone as the haunted corner of Idlewhile Cemetery!

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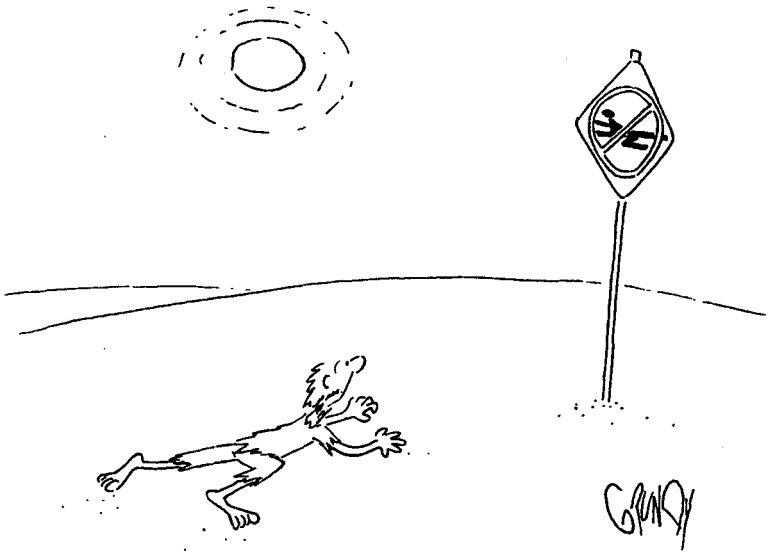
The Shade himself steps back from hanging me up on his trophy wall. Beside him stands the short, lumpish, wide-eyed figure of Busta, that faithful son of Ham who assists the Shade and drives him about Central City in his yellow cab.

"Well, Busta," confides the Shade, "yet another relic of a case well-solved. Not only did we jail Sparky Flint and Jules Reefer for bribery and multiple attempts at homicide, but, thanks to her confession, we cleared up the old murder of her husband, poor chap." The Shade pats me affectionately. "Unfortunately, Dottle had no lucky talisman such as this pipe to save him, in the manner it saved Nolan."

The Shade turns to a set of blueprints spread out on a table. "But enough of past glories, Busta. Let's direct our attention to this diagram of Fort Knox. I expect the Gasworks Gang will strike next month, during the annual ingot-dusting — "

Safe, protected from the elements, privileged to share a vicarious life of crime-fighting, I settle cozily down on the wall to listen to the Shade's brave scheming.

There are worse fates for a broken pipe. And for a man as well.



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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Ombria in Shadow, by Patricia A. McKillip, Ace Books, 2002, $22.95.

I OFTEN GET disillusioned with high fantasy, a genre I grew up loving and still enjoy. It's especially tough right now. As I write this, the first book of Tolkien's trilogy is one week away from hitting the big screen. I've already seen the massive marketing machine roll in and I cringe at the thought of yet another wave of derivative stories arriving to join the multiple versions of *The Lord of the Rings* that are newly available.

At times such as this, my only comfort lies in a small handful of authors who do what fantasy is supposed to do: kindle our sense of wonder with novels that tell their own stories, rather than retelling something we've already been told.

Patricia McKillip does this for me, and has been doing it for years. And what's especially satisfying about her work is that the prose is rich and evocative. The paragraphs swell with mysteries and hidden meanings. The characters are fully defined, but so splendidly *other*.

In her latest novel she introduces us to Ombria, a broken-down city being dealt its death blows by a squabbling ruling class. But this is also a city that has a hidden mirror version of itself that lies in shadows, or underground, separated by no more than a door or a window, unremarked by most. And its only hope for survival lies in a mismatched threesome: the cast-off mistress of the city's late prince, the bastard cousin of the same prince, and a strange feral child — a "waxling" — who lives under the city with a sorceress as strange and riddling as the shadow city.

Ombria in Shadow is pure magic from start to finish. And having read it, I'm once again content that no matter what so many others do to this beloved genre of mine, at

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least there remain writers such as McKillip who remember how stories should be told: individual, and from the heart.

Highly recommended.

St. Patrick's Bed, by Terence M. Green, Forge Books, 2001, $21.95.

Early in this new novel by Terence Green, two characters try to think of a piece of classic literature detailing a relationship between a father and a son that isn't abusive, or has them fighting — the way you might pick *The Grapes of Wrath* if you want to read the definitive novel about the Great Depression. Neither of them can think of a single book to match their criteria.

If I had been present at that conversation, I would have recommended the novel in hand, *St. Patrick's Bed*.

Father and son relationships drive this book. There's the narrator (whom we first met in an earlier novel, *Shadow of Ashland*) and his recently deceased father. There's the narrator and his stepson. And finally, the stepson and his father.

The book opens with the stepson finally asking about his birth father, a man he has never met. His desire to meet him sets the narrator on a road trip to meet the man himself. He's not sure why. He thinks it's to vet the birth father, to make sure his stepson won't get hurt, if and when the two finally meet, but he discovers on the trip that it's also a way for him to reconnect with his own father.

Green's novels don't tell the big story. Civilization isn't imperiled. Worlds aren't saved. But they're big stories in his characters' lives, and they become important to us as readers.

When you add to that Green's deft touch with prose and characterization, and his thoughtful explorations into just what it is that makes people tick, you end up with deeply satisfying books, for all their slim size. His novels have just enough of the supernatural that we can claim him for our own genre, but they are also books that will appeal to a wide readership, one I hope he achieves. One he deserves to achieve.

The Ferryman, by Christopher Golden, Signet, 2002, $6.99.

Janine Hartschorn has lost her baby in childbirth. During the traumatic ordeal, she has a dream of a dark river with a boat upon it, guided

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by a cloaked man holding a lantern. She knows he wants her, but she flings the coins she finds in her hand into the river and escapes.

Unbeknownst to her, she has just had a close encounter with Charon, the legendary ferryman of Greek myth. Worse, she wasn't dreaming. And while she's able to forget the "dream," the ferryman can't forget her.

Cut to teacher David Bairstow, Janine's ex-boyfriend. When he is reintroduced to her, David's life takes on a surreal quality. He's plagued, first with visions of ghosts who have reason to hold a grudge against him, and then with physical attacks by them. Needless to say, we soon discover the connections to Janine's encounter with the ferryman.

All of this might sound rather run-of-the-mill for a horror novel, but the book itself isn't that cut and dried. There's an extra spark here that kept me reading long into the evening on more than one night.

Over the past few years, I've lost a lot of my interest in the horror field. Too many books I've sampled are mean-spirited, and forget to concentrate on the characters, or don't give us even one likable one. Their idea of plot appears to consist of constantly upping the ante in terms of gore and grue and general unpleasantness to the degree that all I come away from the book with is a negative feeling.

Now some might say that's what the horror field is all about: a catharsis in the sense that we can experience the worst that the world (the supernatural as well as our own) has to offer, without the actual dangers.

But I want more from my reading, and I don't find grotesqueries and gore either entertaining or amusing. I can accept their presence in a book, but there needs to be a balance. I don't necessarily mean a happy ending. But I do mean a point beyond simply pulling back the curtain and showing us the horror in all its detailed carnage and fury.

Golden delivers what I'm looking for: good, old-fashioned storytelling with a contemporary sensibility. There's no lack of tension, and he doesn't back away from the consequences of the darkness he has set upon his characters. But neither does he wallow in them.

I liked his deft touch with his characters, his crisp prose, and how he lets the story unfold. I liked the fact that the Catholic priest called in to help is a good man with an

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open mind. And I especially liked the relationship Golden builds between his characters — how they maintain their faith in, and their trust and love for, each other through some very trying circumstances.

We should all be so lucky as to have such friends.

Bran Mak Morn: The Last King, by Robert E. Howard, Wandering Star, 2001, $60.

I didn't grow up on Robert E. Howard's stories, because I didn't come upon them until I was in my late teens, but I certainly devoured them when I finally was introduced to them. My favorite character wasn't the more famous Conan, or even Kull. I was most drawn to Howard's Pictish king, Bran Mak Morn, and treasured my two hardcover collections of those stories when Donald M. Grant published them in 1974: *Worms of the Earth* and *Tigers of the Sea*. (The latter was actually a collection of stories about Cormac Mac Art, my second favorite Howard character, containing "The Night of the Wolf," in which both characters appear.)

I still hold a fond place in my heart for these stories, so I was delighted to discover that Wandering Star has published a truly complete edition of them as the third volume in their *Robert E. Howard Library of Classics* series. And this *is* complete. Besides the stories in the Grant editions, this volume includes a wealth of extra material: poetry, fragments, early drafts of stories, manuscript typescripts, a handwritten manuscript, comments by Howard taken from his correspondence, and other related material.

The book is also profusely illustrated by Gary Gianni with numerous color plates and pen and ink drawings. I'm not entirely enamored with his color work — it's reminiscent of illustrative work from the early part of the last century, but not as polished. However, I love his pen and ink illustrations. They remind me of Roy Krenkel's work, and that's a good thing.

As for the stories...rereading them all these years later, I found they stood up surprisingly well. They're a bit over-written in places, and they're certainly high drama, but these are stories Howard obviously cared about, and his delight in them shows. And while Howard, it seems to me now, is more a young man's author — much as I find

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Burroughs and Lovecraft to be — there's still a special verve to his storytelling that makes his fiction compelling despite its occasional artistic flaws.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

The Crime Studio, by Steve Aylett, Four Walls Eight Windows, 2001, $14.95.

Landor's Tower, by Iain Sinclair, Granta, 2001, $24.95.

Futures, by Peter F. Hamilton, Stephen Baxter, Paul McAuley, Ian McDonald, ed. Peter Crowther, Warner Books, 2001, $6.99.

Dark Light, by Ken MacLeod, TOR, 2002, $24.95.

Perdido Street Station, by China Miéville, Del Rey Books, 2001, $18.

ONE sincerely hopes that, when the tally comes in, Maggie Thatcher won't be seen as the major influence on current British science fiction.

At least one commentator has wondered how much the glum home situation may have contributed to the flowering of what Gardner Dozois, speaking of writers like Peter Hamilton, Iain Banks, and Paul McAuley, calls widescreen baroque space opera. There's a sense of escapism, this commentator notes, a sense of "Let's get out of this place!" in telling contrast to American work of a more ameliorative attitude such as Kim Stanley Robinson's.

In *The British Way*, the fifth volume of his ongoing history of science fiction, James Gunn winnows out differences between British and American science fiction. Until the sixties, he holds, British science fiction was primarily a fiction of pessimism while the U.S., fueled in part by infusion of gee-whiz pulp values via Hugo Gernsback, in part by America's teddy-bear embracing of manifest destiny, produced more optimistic work. In the immediate post-war period, all Europe had reeled from exhaustion, from that sense of the lack of meaning, the zero at the center, of which existentialism developed as the purest expression. With Britain's decline as a world power,

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the American star rising ever brighter, British creative work understandably became gloomier, more introspective.

Vietnam and the sixties broke the back of American optimism, Gunn holds, at which point the influence of Moorcock's New Worlds, with its attack on moribund genre conventions, its alertness to contemporary culture and its dark vision of current events, became signal on both sides of the pond. "How could anyone, in clear conscience," Ken MacLeod asks, "write tales of colonial conquest in space when a real, dirty, colonial war was being fought by the very society which was being held up as a model for the whole human future?"

So the U.S. imported Moorcock & Co., Ballard, middle-period Aldiss, Tom Disch, early D. M. Thomas. And Thatcher's government in turn imported, as in some madcap fool's trade, the worst strains of U.S. society: the ever-widening gulf between rich and poor, the elevation of big business, centralized control of media. British society, where gradations of class (even as perceived in such marginalia as accent) seem infinite, found validation of its age-old heirarchy in an upstart society denying all class distinctions.

M. John Harrison's early stories captured the dark tenor of late-Labour Britain perhaps better than any others. Iain Sinclair's remarkable *Lights Out for the Territory*, a tour of Thatcher's London, shows us a city withdrawn behind economic, actual, and symbolic walls, a city wholly taken over, invaded from within. With *Landor's Tower*, Sinclair himself lights out, touching down in the territory of his native Wales, spinning a resolutely impure story of utopian dreams, bedraggled reality, and our ever-frail efforts to reconcile the two.

Science fiction, it seems to me, from the first has labored to keep two huge medicine balls in the air, pretending they are after all nothing more than an apple and an orange to be juggled, grunting with the effort. One ball is, of course, the genre's nascent escapism. The other is what John Clute terms "agenda science fiction," an ongoing screed of humanity's (read: the American way's, capitalism's) advance. It's this ball that fell with the sixties, tearing holes in the floor, leaving emptinesses to be filled.

The socialist strain in science fiction, running counter to the great myth of American progress, is also constant, reaching back at least to

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Wells's Morlocks and Eloi. When Kingsley Amis in *New Maps of Hell* singled out a book such as Pohl's and Kornbluth's *The Space Merchants*, he acknowledged the influence of New York Trotskyites on early modern science fiction. MacLeod's own novels confront the dialectic head-on. Prior to his, Iain Banks gave voice to communist/utopian ideals in his Culture novels, though recent work conveys a darker vision. More centralist writers like Peter K. Hamilton seem to look forward to a resurgent capitalist future beyond present crises, while others like Paul McAuley, initially seeking refuge of a kind in far-future tales, more recently have elected to face the present head-on.

Indeed, McAuley's near-future London in *Whole Wide World*, caught in the aftermath of the Infowars, gutted and monitored everywhere by security cameras, technology having overrun the very civilization it was meant to support, reads very much like the city Mrs. Thatcher has wrought — remarkably similar to that of Mike Harrison's stories, or the London found by Sinclair in his walkabout.

Science fiction, like much of American fiction, descends not from the classic European novel, whose focus is the individual finding his place in society, but from the romance, dealing instead with the individual in opposition to society; for this reason, even at its most conventional, there is forever something of a revolutionary nature to it. The romancer deals with the very stuff of individuality, isolation and reverie. "However conservative he may be," Northrop Frye writes, "something nihilistic and untamable keeps breaking out of his pages."

Nihilistic and untamable is more or less where Steve Aylett begins. Like many of the UK's best new writers, his cross-genre work affects an extraordinary synthesis of popular and high art. Steeped in the postmodern broth, he's the stepchild of Borges and Beckett as much as Bester and Chandler — not to mention music videos, the punk ethic, comic books and stand-up comedy, noir film.

The Crime Studio, a collection of stories about Beerlight, "a city where crime has been perfected to an art form," is Aylett's first book from 1994, just published here in the States. It's a kind of floor plan for the ultimate America, where individualism has been taken to the limits, bulletproof underwear is openly on sale, and paranoia is

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regarded not as mental aberration but as standard urban equipment, like toothpaste, shoes, and automatic weapons. Think of Don Westlake's crime capers on caffeine overdrive, the Marx Brothers filming *Crime and Punishment* in a single, drunken weekend.

One Beerlight denizen becomes "almost undergraduate with misery," another virtually English "through bad illumination and lack of exercise." A philosophical burglar on the Sartrean model believes that things exist only in the reality of being stolen. Then there's the denizen who plans to make his million with Stressworld, a theme park where drive-by killings occur on the half-hour, and which visitors will have to fight their way out of.

Aylett has also set two novels, *Atom* and *Slaughtermatic*, in Beerlight. In the former, Dead Barbie Dolls complete with casket, cadaver makeup, and bugs are big sellers, as are "syndication bombs" which, set off, strip away all subtext, rendering everything flat and meaningless, "a living Updike novel," for up to three hours.

Lack of subtext is hardly a problem in *Landor's Tower*. No one writes like Iain Sinclair. There is, first, the idiosyncrasy of his preoccupations — obscure genre writers, the history and character of London, Jack the Ripper, viperous booksellers, leftist politics, all of society's refused, refuted and disenfranchised — then the fact that his sentences sweat and huff and fart with the meaning packed onto them. In Sinclair's hands, language simultaneously builds the world and consumes it. Here the story of poet Walter Savage Landor's return to Wales to establish a utopian community is interleaved with a Sinclair-like novelist's failure to write a book about Landor and with two booksellers' doomed pursuit of rare editions. As in all Sinclair's books, elements of the crime novel and of fantasy hit the floor tango-style with "high modern" literary filigree, filmlike dissolves and montage, supercharged language.

Futures, a collection of four novellas, brings us back toward the midline. "Watching Trees Grow" by Peter K. Hamilton is a splendid story of alternate history and near-immortality. Its gentleman detective begins his case in 1832 among battery-driven cars topping out at twenty-five m.p.h., in an England directly descended from the Roman Empire, and resolves it in 2000 with

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space flight a common thing. That we never see the poor, the disadvantaged, even the common man, goes almost unnoticed. Stephen Baxter offers up the mystical tale of another sort of immortality, with its sorcerer's cloak of tribalism, transformation, and the oneness of all, in "Reality Dust." Set largely in a re-creation of Paris on a far world littered with relics of old Earth, Paul McAuley's "Making History" has its protagonist trying to uncover the truth behind history's lie of the Quiet War's final push to the barricades. Like McAuley's one of a series of stories set in the same universe, Ian McDonald's "Tendeleo's Story" tells more of the alien infestation Chaga, "the thing that is like a coral leaf and a rainforest that came out of the object from the sky," bringing with it change, transformation: a truly new, heretofore unimaginable world and life.

Dark Light, continuing a new series begun with *Cosmonaut Keep*, is Ken MacLeod's latest entry as a leading proponent of widescreen baroque space opera and full-out voice of leftist thought in contemporary sf. His earlier tetralogy (*The Star Fraction, The Cassini Division, The Stone Canal, The Sky Road*) has found both fans and critical acclaim. Typically MacLeod's plots are complex, choked with investigations of political systems and maneuvering and a wonderful irony at the tentativeness of it all. (In a sense, each of the previous novels subverts that just before it.) He loves to work with bipartite structures, telling two stories set far apart in time. *Cosmonaut Keep*, relating in alternate chapters the tale of a near-future software expert in a socialist Europe and that of far-future research scientists on the planet Mingled, set up a universe in which humans are the ground floor of intelligence, surmounted by lizardlike but essentially human Saurs, squidlike and far more alien Krakens, and "the gods," who may be acorporeal AI's.

Lots of lumps in the oatmeal this time out. There's good information about "the gods" here, who they are, their influence on other intelligences, but MacLeod doesn't always manage to subsume information into narrative, as he does so successfully the political discourses of earlier novels. The story shoots off, like a porcupine's quills, in many directions. For all that, it's well told, filled with strong characters, serious discourse, offbeat ideas, interesting turns on such genre conventions as alien intervention, lost

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colonies, decadent civilizations recovering their pasts.

From time to time we forget, but we, as science fiction writers and readers, don't *want* to be accepted, to fit in, to join the mainstream. We *like* this sense of being outlaws. It's part of what attracted us initially and keeps us coming back. Nihilistic and untamable, *c'est nous.*

As writers one of our greatest struggles is against doing what we know how to do, to come each day to the page without preconceptions, learned responses, habits of mind: to make it all new again. Over the years of a career, the struggle gets harder, not easier. As readers, too, we can become jaded, scarcely able to read what's before us. The wheel sinks into a mire of cookie-cutter adventure novels, endless variations on familiar themes, grab bags of sorcery, starships, celestial civilizations.

All of which is to say that it's been a long time since I've lost myself in a book as I did in *Perdido Street Station,* a stone brilliant, brilliantly original novel.

No single element here is new, mind. It's the abundance and the meld that work: high fantasy jammed up against gritty realism, a tender love story (albeit with an insect-woman) elbow-to-elbow at the bar with gothic horror, odd stews of medieval and modern technology, tremendous social scope and fascination with the individual; not quite science fiction, not quite fantasy, with fillips of horror, high adventure, intrigue. Miéville shows, too, a profound reverance for the past of fantastic fiction. The novel's as packed with ideas as early Bester, as simultaneously alien and familiar as anything by Phil Farmer or Mervyn Peake, given to social conscience and to its portrait of the city as virtually an independent entity in the manner of Moorcock, tearing us apart like Mike Harrison with its marriage of romantic longing, frustrated intelligence, and despair.

Here is a description of one of the city's sections:

"Strange vapours wafted over the roofs. The converging rivers on either side ran sluggishly, and the water steamed here and there as its currents mixed nameless chymicals into potent compounds. The slop from failed experiments, from factories and laboratories and alchymists' dens, mixed randomly into bastard elixirs. In Brock Marsh, the water had unpredictable qualities. Young mudlarks searching the river quag for scrap had been known

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to step into some discoloured patch of mud and start speaking long-dead languages, or find locusts in their hair, or fade slowly to translucency and disappear."

And here, just as resounding, a description of one of the city's citizens:

"Isaac quietly greeted the old man by the door, Joshua, whose Remaking had been very small and very cruel. A failed burglar, he had refused to testify against his gang, and the magister had ordered his silence made permanent: he had had his mouth taken away, sealed with a seamless stretch of flesh. Rather than live on tubes of soup pushed through his nose, Joshua had sliced himself a new mouth, but the pain had made him tremble, and it was a ragged, torn, unfinished-looking thing, a flaccid wound."

Perdido Street Station does not (as they say) have something for everyone, it has *lots* for everyone. Reading it, I rediscovered my own fascination with stories, understood anew how vital and how often disappointed of late is the connection I made early on with the literature of the fantastic. I suspect that, confronted with *Perdido Street Station*, many others will do the same.

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"She's being audited by the IRS and the FDA."

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Since his first story appeared here two years ago, Alex Irvine has gone on to publish short fiction and verse in Starlight 3, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Asimov's SF, *and* Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet *(not to mention three other stories in our pages). He also worked on the online game version of* A. I. *and his first novel,* A Scattering of Jades, *is due out in a month or two. Oh, and he and his wife became parents of twins last summer.*

His new story steps into the near future, but asks: where's the place in it for us?

Chichen Itza

By Alex Irvine

DESPITE THE SENSORS AND pharm patches and the branching IV drip sprouted from the crook of his elbow, Brian's grandfather didn't look like he was dying. His face still held its color, his eyes shone, his hair was thick and bristly. The picture of health, save for the fact that he couldn't move; his nervous system had begun suffering rolling blackouts a month or so before, and now it was clear that the old man's power grid was fast approaching total failure. The doctor had offered Brian this metaphor by way of explaining a poorly understood viral syndrome that acted like an incredibly accelerated Lou Gehrig's disease, and Brian clutched at it, considering his grandfather as a sort of city whose inhabitants were being exiled by the coming blackout. It helped, somehow, to think of the old man as a collective instead of as an individual who would soon die.

"God-damn comet," a tiny speaker in the wall said. The old man couldn't talk any more, but he retained enough muscular control to subvocalize and a speech processor took care of the rest. The words came

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through distinctly, a slight hesitation between them the only sign of the effort it took Grandpop even to move his tongue and palate.

"Yeah," Brian said. "Once it could have showed up six weeks early."

Grandpop tried to shrug. A vein popped out in the side of his neck. Through the hospice window Brian could see across the towns of Lafayette and Boulder to the Indian Peaks, lumpy and crooked under a May snow. Foothills spread green below them, and at the base of those foothills Brian could almost pick out the exact location of the stone house next to Boulder Creek that he shared with four other grad students. Kris was probably there, fiddling with the garden she kept in the back yard. She wouldn't move in, but she used the house as a surrogate garden/laundry/dog foster home, retreating to her apartment when Brian's roommates got too omnipresent.

He looked back at his grandfather, feeling suddenly beleaguered and in need of refuge. Grandpop was dying, Brian's parents had been dead for years, Kris was fading away from him, he wasn't really close enough to any of his roommates to rely on them for support. He had no one to share the burden of the deathwatch, and Grandpop, who had always been Brian's sounding board in matters emotional, had stopped caring about love at roughly the time he stopped being able to speak.

The transformation in the old man was the worst part about the disease. Brian's mental image of his grandfather was leathery and obstinate, aggressively romantic, accidentally domineering, the kind of man whose presence automatically rearranged any space to center around him. Now, in the final stage of a terminal illness, Grandpop had withdrawn into a sort of dazed bitterness. *God-damn comet* was about the extent of the speaker's transmissions the past few days. Brian understood, or thought he did, but the change was still hard to deal with.

"God-damn comet," the speaker said again.

Before he got sick, Grandpop had planned a trip to Mexico to see Comet Halley from the top of one of the ruined buildings at Chichen Itza. He'd been there in 1986 for the comet's previous rendezvous, on his first trip with the woman who later became Grandma Bruckner, and he'd intended the trip to commemorate Grandma and celebrate his own robust ninety-seven years. Now he lay paralyzed in a hospice in Lafayette, and every time Brian mentioned the trip — which he didn't do very often — the speaker growled, "Stupid sentimental idea."

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It was sentimental, but it appealed to Brian anyway. Something romantic and committed about it reminded him of the way Grandpop had been when Brian was a kid. Then, the old man would have walked to Mexico.

He didn't know what to say. Grandpop wanted to see the comet, but he was going to die instead. What exactly did you say to that?

The old man was looking at him. "Grandpop, I have to go," Brian said. He stood. "I'll come back tomorrow, okay?"

"Tomorrow," the speaker said, and Brian closed the door softly behind him.

The house was empty when he got home, but he heard Kris's voice muttering softly in the back yard. At first he couldn't make out the words, but as he passed through the kitchen, with its pawprinted floor and breakfast nook hung with copper pans, Brian's ears started to make sense of the speech.

It was a rapid-fire flow of Latin: *Cynodon dactylon, Eleusine indica, Trifolium repens.*

He stood on the back stoop watching her. Kris, on her knees in the garden, weeded around new tomato plants and among a cluster of nearly mature peas. *Pisum sativum, Lycopersicon esculentum.* Automatically as breathing, she murmured the name of each weed as she tossed it into a pile by the open driveway gate: *Ambrosia artemisiifolia, Convolvulus arvensis, Taraxacum officinale.* When she paused to brush a lock of black hair from her eyes, she said *papillapigmentfilamentepidermis*, all in one rushing word.

Post-Link fugue, Brian told himself, parroting a doctor again. Perfectly normal during the first couple of weeks after the retinal piggybacks were implanted. Still, it scared the bejeezus out of him, like she was possessed, or channeling. Which in a way she was. Her freshly Linked brain was still accommodating itself to the torrent of information that now surged through her whenever she focused her attention on anything. The natural outlet was speech, and the doctors had said that a mania for naming was a common but temporary post-Uplink distraction.

"*Leptinotarsa decemlineata*," Kris said, and flicked a bug off one of the tomato plants. "Go away."

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He walked toward the garden and said, "Kris."

She turned her head and Brian noticed that the two black eyes the implantation had given her were now faded to a dark yellow. "Hey, Brian," she said in her own voice, a throaty mezzo with just a little grain, and then she added "*Homo sapiens*" in the other voice, the unconscious automatic articulation of muscle. She smiled at him.

She doesn't even know she said that, he thought. He wanted to get on her bike, leaning there against the corner of the house, and ride away.

All of the doctors said it would pass, but Brian had an irrational feeling that it wouldn't, that the Kris he was seeing was the Kris he would always see, that she would go on with her savant-speech as long as he could stand to be around her. A little bit distant, a little bit preoccupied, part of her mind permanently drawn away to the volcanic flood of information that had become for her a dominant sixth sense. Doctors said what doctors said.

It hurt him that he could not share it. He had met Kris during a depression that seemed in retrospect to have been a bit self-indulgent but at the time had been like going through the day shrinkwrapped. Nothing touched him and he couldn't muster the strength to reach out. The depression had started to lift one summer afternoon as Brian was walking along Boulder Creek behind the public library. A hummingbird had appeared in front of his face: flash, there, bright red and hovering, one black gleam replacing another as it turned its head from side to side and looked at him. Then it was gone, and he'd stood there with the creek rippling by and a stupefied grin on his face. Speechless. Not a thought in his head. A little stoned by the intensity of the connection he'd felt, a little shaken by its evanescence.

Kris had blown into his life a few days after that, suffusing him with the kind of surprised joy he had felt at seeing that hummingbird. Only she had stayed.

Brian didn't believe in omens, exactly, but he had come to think of the hummingbird as a harbinger, if not of Kris then of his reawakening from isolation. The idea of her had become superimposed on the memory of the hummingbird, and whenever Brian thought about it he realized that she was inscribed in every pleasant memory he could think of from the past few years. He thought of her constantly. Something she'd said about

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Chaucer once that he'd ended up putting in an exam essay. Her recessed incisor. The taste of the skin behind her ears, the tingle of static electricity in her hair the one afternoon when they'd stayed up on South Boulder Peak a little too long. The noise she made in the back of her throat when she rolled over in the middle of the night. The intertwined scents of piñon pine needles and sexual musk. The color of the Flatirons before dawn, as they catch the hint of daybreak and glow while stars still speckle the sky: he remembered that because of the night he and Kris had spent lying in the grass at Chautauqua Park, following the triangle of Jupiter, Saturn, and the Pleiades across the sky and talking about going to Newfoundland or Ulan Bator or Mars. Going together. The Sun had come up just as the Moon was going down, and Brian would never forget watching the sky change color around the brilliant bone-white of the Moon.

And now she had a sixth sense that drew her away from him.

Kris got up and walked over to kiss him. "How's your grandfather?"

"Other than the terminal illness, he's pretty much okay." Stupid fucking question, Brian thought, even though he knew she'd only spoken to leave him an opportunity for whatever he needed to vent. But Jesus: *How's your grandfather*?

Let it be, he told himself. This is hard on her too.

He started talking to distract himself from how pissed he was. "It's hard to be angry at someone who's going to die."

Kris rubbed dirt from her fingertips. "Why would you be angry at him?"

"I get in kind of a deterministic funk, you know, seeing how he's just going to die. Nothing anybody can do about it. We cure cancer, grow new hearts, regenerate severed spines — and Grandpop gets this brand-new disease that's going to kill him anyway." From the back yard, through a break in the trees, Brian could see the upended slabs of the Flatirons wearing their late-afternoon salmon pink. "Grandpop was a big mountain climber when he was younger. He got my dad into it."

"Oh," Kris said carefully.

"It's hard not to blame him."

"Brian, you might as well blame the freezing point of water," Kris said. "Your parents fell because of a rockslide, which happened because water expands and contracts when it freezes and melts and because gravity

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points toward the center of the Earth. Do you think your grandfather would have taken your father climbing if he'd known it would kill his only son?"

"No," Brian said. "No, of course I don't. But I'm discovering that this ahead-of-time grief is a post-hoc-fallacy kind of emotion. Grandpop's dying. It doesn't make sense. I try to make it make sense by imposing patterns. This impulse to impose patterns spreads. I blame Grandpop for my mom and dad falling off a mountain. See?" He looked at Kris, trying very hard not to take his bottled-up anger out on her. "Self-analysis is easy, and I still feel shitty."

She just looked back at him, waiting for him to go on. So he did.

"And the thing is, he never once tried to force me into anything remotely hairy-chested or outdoorsy. I was kind of a strange being in my family; they all wanted to climb mountains and I got a bigger kick out of reading about someone else doing it. I don't think my dad ever really got comfortable with that. But after he died, Grandpop absolutely let me go my own way. He let me know that if I ever wanted to come hiking or ice-climbing or whatever, he was happy to take me along — he asked me every single time he went — but I also knew that he didn't look down on me for not going.

"So what do I do? I get mad at him for not pressing me. I start to think that if he thought I was a real male Bruckner, he'd want me to take up the old man's pastimes, carry on the family tradition of death-defying nature worship. That's what my father called it. Death-defying nature worship, like snowshoeing along the Continental Divide was religious. I never understood it. But I wanted Grandpop to want me to understand it, and I sort of got bitter at him for not trying harder. Put that together with what I feel now, as an adult, which is that I owe him something and don't know how to make it good, and...."

He realized that Kris had been muttering something under her breath for several seconds. When he stopped speaking, he could parse it: *ergo propter hoc ergo propter hoc ergo propter hoc. Primus inter pares. Pro bono publico.*

Piscem natare doces, she said, and her cheeks dimpled in a dreamer's smile. *Doctum cani antiquo dolos novos. Permitte canes dormitos sitos esse.*

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"Jesus, Kris!" he shouted.

"What?" she said, taking a step away from him.

"You don't even know, do you? You don't hear yourself naming the goddamn weeds as you pull them, in Latin, you name me genus and species when I come out the door, now you finish my phrases to yourself while I'm trying to say something, what the fuck? Is *Wheelock's Latin* running all the time on one of the piggybacks?"

"The doctors explained this, Brian," she said, keeping her voice steady. Her fingertips rubbed against each other, bits of dirt falling from them into the grass. "Fugues. All subconscious. You know I'm listening to you."

"Part of you. I know part of you is. The rest is I don't know where. Up there." Brian swiped an arm at the sky, coloring with Rocky Mountain sunset. "Communing with a fucking satellite. Sure as hell isn't here."

One of Kris's hands went to her mouth, and Brian could see her making a focused effort not to cry. When she spoke, her voice had more stone than sadness in it. "You're upset about your grandfather," she said. "We've had this argument before, and I sure don't want to have it again right now. I just want to tell you one thing, Brian: don't take it out on me. You're better than that, and I don't deserve it."

She turned around, jerked her bicycle upright, and pedaled away without another word.

HE VISITED GRANDPOP the next day, and the one after that, and each of the next sixteen days until the old man died quietly — as if he could have died any other way — on the thirtieth of May, 2061. A doctor came into the room when the Code Blue alarm started its insistent beep. He shut off the alarm and noted the time of death at the wall terminal, right under the speaker that Brian half-expected to mutter something angry and inarticulate. Brian witnessed the death statement and authorized another form attesting to the hospice's compliance with state and federal palliative-care guidelines.

"My sympathies for your loss, Brian," the doctor said with complete sincerity before leaving Brian alone with Grandpop's body.

Brian looked at the old man's face, trying to see if he could discern

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some difference between the stillness of death and the inert mask of paralysis Grandpop had worn for the last five or six days he'd been alive. If anything had changed, though, Brian couldn't see it. He'd been so surrounded, so permeated by the knowledge of Grandpop's death that the event itself came only as a kind of fulfillment.

"All right, Grandpop," he said, because he had to say something.

It had rained earlier that day, and through broken clouds the setting sun cast the shadows of the Indian Peaks up into the sky. In another hour Comet Halley would be visible through telescopes.

So damn mundane, Brian thought. Grandpop got old and died. He thought the haze that seemed to hang around him must be grief, but it didn't feel like grief. Grandpop got old and died.

Just like that he made the decision.

"I'll go for you, Grandpop," he said.

He caught himself waiting for the speaker to answer. Before Grandpop had fallen silent six days before, he'd gotten single-minded on the topic of memorials. Nothing, he said. Don't do anything. Let me be dead. Only the deterioration of his nerves had overwhelmed the speech processor's ingenuity, and what came out was *Uh-ing. Oan oo eng. Eh ee ee eh.*

It struck Brian then how creepily similar the speaker's cryptic cadences seemed to Kris's sleeping murmurs. He shivered, physically shaking the thought away.

Oan oo eng.

"I have to, Grandpop," he said. "It's for me, all right? I have to."

He lifted the crisp white bedsheet over Grandpop's face and let it settle. "Okay," he said, and went into the hall. On his way out he passed an orderly coming to prepare Grandpop's body for cremation.

"I'm going to go to Mexico in a couple of weeks," he told Kris when she came for dinner the next night. After twenty-four hours behind drawn shades trying to figure out how to mourn, Brian had wanted to go out, but Kris was jittery about the fugues, didn't want people staring in restaurants.

She put her fork down and dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. "I thought your grandfather didn't want you to do anything like that."

"For seventy-six years he planned to go back there the next time the

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comet came around," Brian said. "After Grandma died he got even more determined about it. Then he got sick and I think it was easier for him to reject things he'd wanted to do than admit he'd never be able to do them. Call it a rationalization if you want to. I think he was trying to make dying easier on himself."

Kris waited for him to continue, eyes steady and focused, and Brian lost his train of thought for a minute when he realized how long it had been since he'd had her direct attention. "Um," he said. "So." Maybe the doctors were right, and she'd just taken a little while to arrange the piggybacked information flow.

"It's for me really," Brian went on. "I miss the old man, and I want to do something for him. Some kind of goofy symbolic romantic sentimental thing that's exactly what he might have done before he got sick. I'm going to scatter his ashes at Chichen Itza the day Comet Halley looks best from Earth."

"Wow," Kris said, "hope it doesn't rain," and that was when Brian really knew she was there, completely there, and he was laughing with her and it was like the piggybacks had never happened.

Late, late that night, after they'd made love and fallen asleep and he'd woken up when she'd come back from the bathroom, Brian lay listening to the creek and watching Kris sleep. He felt a little jittery, as if she'd be angry if she caught him looking at her, and he figured she would if she knew why he was watching her.

He'd been reading up on the Uplink, its effects. Like any new and possibly revolutionary medical procedure, it was wreathed in hyperbole both positive and negative. From one side hosannas, from the other sackcloth gnashings. Either humanity was entering into a new age of absolute availability of information, or the fundamental incompleteness that made each human distinct was being thoughtlessly and irreversibly erased. Technoprophets heralded the advent of practical telepathy, the shared knowledge of human civilization; New Humanists deplored the headlong rush away from unmediated experience of the world. Moderate voices couldn't even hear themselves reason.

Brian wanted to be moderate. The procedure itself was safe, had been tested for years on a variety of first lower mammals and then primates: the

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retinal piggybacks tracked whatever the eyes focused on, and a custom-grown genetic processor framed on the patient's own bone cells and powered by body heat identified the physical objects and selected key words from the patient's speech. These objects and words became topic searches on a satellite network that would achieve global coverage by the end of 2062, and the resultant spray of information squirted along a private frequency to a receiver drilled into the mastoid part of the skull. Implantation generally caused temporary light sensitivity and some maxillary or malar bruising. There was a risk of blindness, but you could always get new eyes, and — at least according to Kris's doctors — the risk of psychological dysfunction due to the brain's inability to handle its radically expanded informational vistas had been wildly overstated by hostile manipulations of study data.

Kris herself had shrugged off Brian's worries: "Everything new brings alarmists out of the woodwork. In the eighteenth century people thought that vaccinations would turn you into a cow." There was no good way to answer that. And the procedure was very expensive, but Kris had money and none of it was technically challenging any more, and anyway technical obstacles hadn't kept Brian lying awake watching the woman he loved sleep under moonlight. He wanted to see if what he had read about Uplinked dreaming was true.

Kris's breathing slowed and deepened. Brian couldn't see for sure, but he thought her eyes were moving. Then she started to talk.

At first he couldn't make out any words; after a moment he figured out that she wasn't speaking English. "*Matay nipagesh*?" she said, quite clearly, followed by a rush of indistinguishable syllables, and then, again plain as day, "Chichen Itza. June. *Sivan*." All of the clarity faded from her speech again, and gradually she fell silent. Had she said something like Halley? Sure sounded like it, but that could have been associations in Brian's own sleep-deprived brain. He wanted to shake Kris awake, find out what she'd been dreaming, what language she'd spoken, what it had been like.

"I'll be damned," he whispered. It was true. The piggybacks even tracked dream-visions. The dreams of the Uplinked were open for anyone to see. Brian wondered how many dream addicts were already out there immersing themselves in slumbering Uplinked reveries.

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He lay awake for a long time after that, wondering what else he had read was true.

"Did you dream about Chichen Itza last night?" he asked her in the morning, to see if she remembered.

"Um," Kris said. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"Don't you ever think it's weird that people could hack your Link and see your dreams?"

Her mug banged on the breakfast-nook table and she said, "Not this early, Brian. Please."

Brian set down the spatula he'd held hovering over scrambled eggs. "I didn't mean it like that. Not trying to be combative. Just a question. Doesn't that seem weird?"

"No mood to be persecuted," she grumbled into the steam rising from her tea.

"Kris, come on. It's been less than a month. I still have questions. Don't you still have questions? Does everything make sense for you that fast?" Brian served the eggs onto two plates, added a liberal portion of salsa to each, and sat across from her. "I'm trying to reach an accommodation with this, okay? Help me out a little."

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Brian scrolled through airfares to Merida, Mexico. Kris was putting in library time, planning to come over for dinner. Without her around, Brian had to repress a recurrent urge to turn off the terminal and walk over to the travel agency on Canyon Boulevard next to the liquor store.

It wasn't that Brian hated computers; he'd just absorbed from his grandfather an abiding belief in the fundamental importance of human contact. Computers were faster, more efficient, et cetera and so on, but their eyes didn't light up when you walked in and said, "I'd like to look into airfares to Chichen Itza." It was possible to get a video link to one of the travel-and-tourism nets, but why would anyone do that when they could just walk around the corner onto Canyon Boulevard and talk to the fearsomely brisk and smiling young women at Canyon Travel? Brian was old-fashioned, so old-fashioned in fact that it was old-fashioned to be

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old-fashioned like he was. He knew this, and it changed nothing except for his teeth-gritted determination to get the damned reservation on the computer so there would be one less thing for him and Kris to argue about. If he went to Canyon Travel now, she would doubtless misconstrue it as a gesture of sublimated disdain for her piggybacks, and that was the last thing in the world Brian wanted.

So he scrolled through menus. As it turned out, it was easier to fly into Cozumel than Merida, and the park-service maglev shuttle from Cozumel was faster than the bus from Merida. Brian bought plane and maglev tickets, then started thinking about a place to stay. Grandpop would have camped, even at ninety-seven, but Brian felt that undertaking a journey to Mexico was gesture enough. He didn't need to sleep in the mud too.

There was a hotel, though, where he and Grandma had stayed after a downpour....

Brian pulled up a fresh screen and dug around in Grandpop's photo album. Names and places skated across the screen: Annapurna and Allagash, Gizeh and Gobi, Yosemite and Yucatan. Aha. The Piramide Inn, starting place of Chichen Itza tourists since time immemorial, or at least since the nineteen-seventies. There was Grandpop with his new girlfriend Eliza Millett, later Grandma Liza, grinning for an anonymous photographer who hadn't quite managed the focus on Grandpop's old 35-millimeter Pentax. Grandpop was hiding a cigarette behind his back, and Grandma was trying not to laugh out loud at something someone had just said. Had the photographer made a joke? In English or Spanish?

"Hm," Brian said, and ran a search for the Piramide Inn. It popped up immediately, almost obscured by a phalanx of aggressive bubblescreen adlinks. Brian patiently waited for those to pop, and then he set about making reservations at the Piramide. The symmetry of it appealed to him. Continuity.

He'd heard the back door slam, but he didn't really register Kris's arrival until she was in the bedroom with him, looking over his shoulder at the overlapping screens. "Brian," she said.

"Just a second."

"Brian, look at me."

He did. She was practically jumping in place, a wide and excited smile lighting up her face. "I want to go with you," she said.

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This was more of a surprise than, in retrospect, Brian thought it should have been. "You do?"

"Yeah, I do." She nodded and smiled, waiting for him.

He found himself nodding and smiling too. "Great," he said. "Yeah, excellent. This'll be good for us. Time together, in a strange place. Yeah. This'll be good."

They kissed. Kris was a little sweaty, and Brian could feel her heartbeat where his fingers traced the hollow of her throat.

The Cenote de Sacrificios gaped at his feet before he was really ready for it, a perfectly cylindrical hole in the ground fifty meters across and twenty deep, with still green water at the bottom like the pupil of a blind eye reflecting the scattered clouds of the Yucatan sky. Omphalos, Brian thought. Next to him Kris said, very softly, "The lugubrious associations attaching to it fill the imagination with indescribable melancholy."

"What?"

She looked at him for the first time since they'd left the Piramide Inn. "It's what Desiree Charnay said when he wrote about the Cenote. He explored the whole area in the eighteen-eighties." Her nose wrinkled, ever so slightly, and she looked back down into the water. "They dredged it in 1904 because Spanish records said that the Maya threw gems in with sacrificial victims, honoring the rain god. Edward Herbert Thompson did that. He found skeletons and all kinds of jade, archaeological treasures...." Kris trailed off and smiled self-consciously. "Right. Ugly American."

That was a response, Brian thought. And I didn't say anything.

"Oh my God," Kris said, suddenly delighted. "Did you know he once wrote an essay suggesting that the Maya were survivors of Atlantis?" Her laughter rang bright from the Cenote's bare stone walls. She was no longer speaking to Brian.

"Chichen," he said, to distract himself. *Mouth of the well.* He knew that much just from the tour guide's theatrically convivial Spanglish introduction. To the Maya, the Cenote was a passage between worlds, a spirit gate. Grandpop would have called it superstitious bullshit, but his tone of voice would have been tinctured with admiration.

Brian worked his way around to the other side of the Cenote, away from the concrete apron at the end of the causeway that led back to the

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main plaza of Chichen Itza. He didn't speak to Kris before he went, and he was glad to see that she was following. It meant she still knew he was there.

Several times since they'd gotten off the maglev shuttle, she'd fugued out on him, standing still but not rigid and looking at nothing in particular, her mouth moving but only drifting snatches of sound coming out. Brian wasn't sure whether this was an improvement on the unconscious logorrhea or not. She always came back after a few seconds, but the spaces of her absence were deeply unnerving.

"Time," Brian said to her when she caught up with him. He'd come two hundred degrees or so counterclockwise from the end of the causeway. A thick stand of brush had survived the tourist onslaught long enough to disguise his intent.

"I think he would appreciate this," Kris said as Brian took an aluminum vial about the size of a cigar tube from the thigh pocket of his shorts.

"Yeah," he said. "I think so too."

With that he unstoppered the vial, leaned out as far as he safely could, and tipped a long plume of ash into the shadowed depths of the Cenote de Sacrificios. Kris watched him, and when he'd returned the tube to his pocket, she laid a hand gently on the back of his neck.

"Nobody believed they died," she said. "They were supposed to be carried away by the chacs, rain gods who lived in the earth."

Brian considered this for a while, then shook his head. "They died," he said.

HUNGER FOLLOWED with impolite quickness on the heels of Brian's moment of mourning. He and Kris walked slowly back up the causeway, looking at the people who like them but unlike them had come to Chichen Itza from wherever they had come from. It was, Brian figured, a pretty typical traveler's moment, but that didn't change its impact on him. Take several thousand people, he thought. Remove them from familiar surroundings and lump them together in a place they've all always wanted to see, and you find out just where similarities refract into differences.

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Me, Brian Bruckner, I'm different from them. But I want to be different from them in some way that makes my similarities with Kristine Albritton meaningful. I want to see us as a united pair in the midst of this anonymous throng.

As soon as he'd finished that thought, lust ran right up the back of hunger and trampled it out of his mind.

"Hey," he said to Kris, trying not to grin the way he wanted to grin, "let's find us a little secluded place."

She played it cool, only quirking an eyebrow and letting a smile play at the corners of her mouth. "My goodness," she said. "It's true what they say about funerals."

Somewhere near the boundary of the park, they found a secluded little overgrown test trench and made love with much suppression of giggles and awkward slapping at opportunistic mosquitoes. Nobody bothered them, and once Brian had located the bug spray in one pocket of his shorts (ignoring Kris's arch joke about the aluminum tube riding against his thigh), things went more smoothly. So smoothly, in fact, that afterward they nestled into a hollow and fell asleep.

That was just broadcast worldwide to anyone who knew where to look, Brian thought distantly, stupefied by sex and the afternoon heat. Sweat trickled down his belly into his navel. The ground was soft and much cooler than the air.

But heck, what a rugged guy I am, rolling around in the Yucatan jungle. Let 'em watch.

As he fell asleep, he was thinking about Edward Herbert Thompson, one more Ugly American digging trenches in search of lost Atlantis.

By the time Brian stirred again, the light under the forest canopy had purpled into something like dusk. Kris was nowhere to be seen.

Brian got dressed and clambered out of the trench onto a trail. Not seeing Kris anywhere nearby, he headed back into the center of the park. Two thoughts competed for attention in his head: he was hungry (*ravenousstarvinginsatiable*, he thought in a crude parody of Kris) and he was worried about Kris. The worry was wrapped around a core of anger.

Between El Mercado, the excavated marketplace, and the Grupo de las Mil Columnas, some kind of memorial building with an altar attached to

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the Templo de los Guerreros, a new marketplace had sprung into being. The rows of vendor carts weren't technically legal on park grounds, but like many other things in turbocapitalized Mexico, technicalities were easily smoothed over with the proper application of pesos. Smells of fruit, cooking meat, spices, peppers, and beer fractured Brian's attention. He hesitated, then plunged on through the market in search of Kris.

Just at the thinning fringe of the market crowds, he thought he heard her voice. Brian ducked behind a tamale stand, nearly had a heart attack when a small hairless dog scrambled up to sniff him, then found Kris under a tree, deep in animated conversation with a tall, angular woman wearing cutoff army fatigue pants and a Toluca soccer jersey. "Jesus, Kris," he said, throwing his arms up as he approached them. "You couldn't leave a note?"

As the words left his mouth, Brian became aware of an incongruity between his speech and theirs. Discerning exactly where the difference lay absorbed his entire mind for what seemed like a long time, but Kris and the other woman had barely turned their heads toward him when he realized that they hadn't been speaking English. Kris's dream, Brian thought. He looked at the other woman, olive-skinned and black-haired.

"What," he began. Kris said, "Brian. Yael. Yael, Brian."

"You met here," Brian said, or asked. He wasn't sure.

They exchanged a glance. Yael said something to Kris, who grinned and repeated the phrase, then for Brian's benefit said, "Not exactly."

"Your dream," he said. "Kris, were you talking to her in your dream?"

"Speaking Hebrew," Kris said, "and I didn't even know I was speaking, and I didn't even know I knew Hebrew, and I didn't really know we'd met until I ran into her here." She blinked and said, "*Ivrit, Hebreo, Hebreu, Hebraisch.*"

"Ran into," Brian said. Something was starting to come together in his head. He started to pursue it, but just then another man approached them, flinging up his hands almost exactly as Brian had. "Yael, where have you been?" he asked, his voice just a shade below a shout. "You can't just walk away like that, this is Mexico, what are you doing?" He glared suspiciously at Kris and Brian. Brian couldn't help but crack a smile.

"I was just doing the same thing," he said, and stuck out his hand. "Brian Bruckner."

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"Nathan ben-Zvi," the other man introduced himself, and then they all stood looking at each other for a long moment.

"This is Kris," Brian said. "I just found out she speaks Hebrew."

Yael said something to Kris, who reached to clasp Brian's hand. "I'll be back," she said, and went with Yael across the plaza toward the ancient observatory, El Caracol.

"What did she say?" Brian asked Nathan.

"She said she wanted Kris to meet someone," Nathan answered. He shook his head. "It's like they're at a reunion."

This comment provoked a relieved feeling of fellowship in Brian. Yes, he thought. That's right. Nathan felt just like he did. They gazed at the spot in the crowd where Kris and Yael had disappeared.

"I read that there are babies who get Uplinked *in utero*, and never bother to learn to talk," Nathan said after a time. "They could, but they never bother."

This idea staggered Brian. To be Uplinked before you had any direct, unmediated experience of the world...were these babies picking up language from their links, or were they, dear God, forming their own language, a baby-language with a million words for mother? What did they say to each other?

"Before long," Nathan said, "they won't even notice the rest of us."

"Sure they will."

Nathan turned to him, a deep crease between his eyebrows. "Why? Why would they? Even now, Yael has an entire social, intellectual, emotional sphere that I know nothing about. That I can know nothing about. That I have no access to. And she was twenty-six when she Uplinked. A baby...what use does a baby have for the world when it has its Link before it's ever taken a breath?" He fell silent.

Brian wanted to disagree. Nathan's perspective seemed alarmist, wild-eyed, irrational. But when Brian remembered Kris naming the weeds in the back yard and then saying *Homo sapiens* to him without knowing it, he had to ask himself: *How much else is going on that neither one of us consciously knows about? What bridges are we building in other directions?*

El Caracol loomed to the south, crowds gathering on its observatory deck, more people streaming up its stairways that faced the cardinal

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directions. Brian wondered who Kris and Yael were meeting there, wondered too why they needed to meet at all if they'd already lived in each other's dreams through Uplink. Must be because they were adults, he decided. The Uplink is laid over the top of a deep matrix of impulses to connect physically, to get close to other humans. But the babies, Jesus. Was Nathan right? Against his better judgment, Brian caught himself mimicking Kris again: El Caracol, the snail, *die Schnecke. Escargot*?

It was a Spanish name anyway. What had the Maya called it? Now that Brian thought of it, Chichen Itza was a bizarre melange of Spanish and Mayan names: Tzompantli stood next to the Juego de Pelota, the Cenote Xtoloc next to El Caracol, Chichen Itza itself in the state of Yucatan between Merida and Valladolid. Different histories coming together, Brian thought, and only one really survived. The Spaniards won; the Maya are a curiosity. But they were right about this place: *Chichen*, mouth of the well. Gateway from this world to the next.

Looking over his shoulder, Brian saw the massive pyramid called El Castillo, the Castle, its eastern side in deep shadow. The sun was setting. Pyramid before me, he thought, and pyramid behind, and time like two pyramids aimed toward each other, the invisible point of their meeting the fulcrum of the present. Gateways. Into the Uplinked world.

His mind ran in circles like this for several minutes as the sun fell behind the treeline. "You here for the comet?" Nathan asked.

Brian nodded. "It's kind of a commemorative thing. For my grandfather."

"Ah," Nathan said, a little uncomfortable. "We're honeymooning. Yael's idea. If you don't want to see the comet, don't look to the south. It'll be clear any minute."

"You think they're here to see it?" Brian asked, and from the look on Nathan's face he knew that Nathan understood who he meant by *they*. Already the Uplinked were taking on a collective identity.

"Yeah," Nathan said. "It's a bithead thing, like some kind of organizational meeting or something. I heard Yael muttering about it."

"She dreams too," Brian said, and Nathan nodded.

Bithead, Brian thought, offended by the term despite a strong desire to use it himself. Pejorative slang was a powerfully comforting thing.

"I was thinking how strange it is that they even need to get together,"

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Brian said. His objectivity surprised him; apart from the consequences to human culture, he was already beginning to figure out that Kris was lost to him, and still he talked about it like it was happening in a movie. He had an urge to blame even that on the Uplink: even thinking about it robbed him of the ability to experience anything immediately, in itself.

But that was bullshit. He'd known Kris was receding from him for a while, and this distance was his way of accepting what he'd prepared for.

He tried to joke his way out of it. "Man, I used to think I didn't understand women. But guys like you and me, this is something different."

Nathan smiled, but just barely. Brian could see that he too knew that coming to Chichen Itza, he'd lost the woman in his life, and apparently Nathan hadn't been prepared the way Brian had. Of course, Brian hadn't known he'd been prepared until just then.

"It's mostly men, actually," Nathan said. "I read that only about thirty percent of Uplinks are performed on women."

"Well, aren't we lucky," Brian said.

Kris and Yael materialized out of the crowd and the dusk. Yael took Nathan's hands and said something softly in Hebrew. Brian heard Kris in his head: *Ivrit, Hebreo, Hebreu, Hebraisch.*

She walked up to him, made no move to touch him. Didn't really look at him, even; her face stayed turned toward the southwest, where El Caracol nestled dark against the last glow of sunset.

"They're here, aren't they?" Brian said to her. "The ones who could come."

"Yes. They're here," she said. To him but not really to him. Brian, not wanting to see the comet yet, cupped a hand around the orbit of his left eye and followed her line of sight to the flat top of El Caracol, dense with people looking up at the sky. A hundred, perhaps. Two hundred. He didn't know. They spilled onto the upper terraces below the observatory deck. He felt an almost gravitational tug on his hand, the night-before-Christmas desire to see, but he resisted it.

"This is why you wanted to come," he said, meaning it as a question, but it didn't come out that way even though he'd wanted to give her the chance to deny it. The possibility of reconciliation, snatched from a depth of separation he hadn't understood until just right then, arose and passed

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in her silent averted gaze. She saw the crowd, knew without asking which of them were speaking to her, and did not at that moment consciously count him among their number. It did not occur to her to deny what was so obviously and axiomatically and dispassionately true.

The long moment on the rim of the Cenote de Sacrificios replayed itself in Brian's mind: the spread of ash on dark water, yes, and the touch of her fingers on the back of his neck, but mostly the moment when those fingers had lifted away and the last real possibility of contact between them had drifted like a sunlit plume of ash down into the gateway between worlds. A twist of regret caught Brian's breath, and he thought, *I wish I'd known.*

Kris was murmuring again, almost subvocalizing the way Grandpop in his extremity had ghosted words into the speaker by his bed. On top of El Caracol, an answering murmur rippled in the damp night air, the accidental voicings of a newborn human symphony.

She started climbing the steps, her pace slow and certain, her face lifted to the sky. Brian followed her to the first platform and stopped as she continued up the worn stone steps. Yael was a step ahead of her. When Kris reached the observatory platform he almost said something. Instead he allowed his gaze to be drawn at last to the southern sky.

Comet Halley was past perihelion, moving past Earth back into the vasty deeps at the edge of the Solar System, its tail leading it into its final sojourn. It had given too much of itself this time and it would never return, but in compensation it blazed in elegiac brilliance across an arm's length of the early summer sky. "Hey there, hairy star," Brian breathed in greeting, forgetting for a moment everything but the comet's beautiful dying fall into his eyes that were only his.

When he looked away from it, Kris was gone. The dome of El Caracol stood above a tableau of still figures with heads tilted back like Easter Island monoliths and mouths unconsciously forming words that blended into what almost but not quite ever became a kind of chant. Somehow the extended topography of heads and shoulders, black against the faintest light still in the sky, reminded Brian of the Indian Peaks, shouldering each other aside to look down into his grandfather's hospice room. Another gravitational urge drew him, this time to join, and Brian took three slow steps up toward the observatory platform, feeling for each step with his

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gaze locked on the rows of starlit silhouettes. Looking for Kris, knowing what he had to do to really find her. Acquiescing.

Almost imperceptibly, people began to move. Small groups slowly flowed toward the edges of the platform, began to drip down the stairway in twos and threes. Two women passed Brian, not meeting his eyes, glancing over their shoulders at the remaining figures scattered erect and murmuring around the observatory dome. Others followed, nudging Brian to the edge of the stair. On each face he saw a variant of the same expression: awestruck, fearful, uncomprehending wonder. None of them spoke, as if the undulating drone of the Uplinked watchers had made them fearful of speech.

They passed, and Brian stood alone on the terraced flank of El Caracol. At the edge of his field of vision, Comet Halley shone like an incandescent veil. In its light he could make out faces on the stone summit.

He stopped himself before he could find Kris. Acquiesce to that, he told himself. Eyes closed, he listened to the crest and fall of sound, wanting at least to pick her voice from the aural palimpsest that surrounded him. He soaked it in, felt again the tidal urge to join, to find a way through the noise to emergent understanding. Time slipped by, and he began to parse single voices, most of them male. He ignored them, concentrating on the women, moving his mouth silently to get a sense of their cadence and inflection, knowing he'd recognize Kris from that even if her voice was already altering the way it had in the garden, before he'd even decided to come to Chichen Itza on a stupid romantic memorial pilgrimage, *alone without any idea of how alone....*

The sound of his own voice snapped him back into himself. Parroting again. Picking sounds, syllables, running words over his own tongue without knowing or, in the end, really caring what they meant. He couldn't even remember what he'd been saying, or in which language.

"Hey," someone said, and tapped him on the shoulder.

Brian blinked and started away from the contact. On the step below him stood Nathan ben-Zvi. They looked at each other for a long silent moment before Nathan said, "Don't you think.... I mean, we should go, right? Come on."

Nathan's face looked like it might fly apart at any second. A muscle spasmed in his jaw, his eyes stared beneath a deeply etched frown on his

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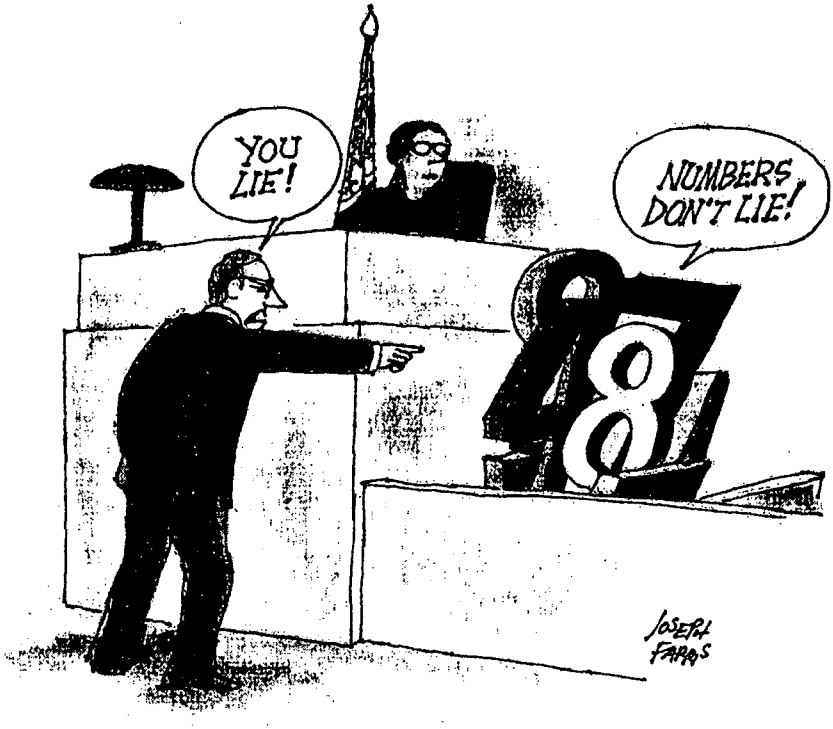
forehead, and the skin around his mouth was tight and pebbled with tension. His voice stayed remarkably steady, though, steadier in fact than Brian's when Brian swallowed and said, "Yeah."

Do I look like that? Brian thought. Nathan's wife is up there. It's worse for him. His wife. At least Kris and I hadn't made each other any promises.

Still he came back to get me.

He let Nathan stay a step ahead of him, no more, as they descended the steps and walked away from the newborn unity of the voices on El Caracol.



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LUCIUS SHEPARD

ONE FILM TO RULE THEM ALL

If J. R. R. Tolkien were to pop back into the world and see what he has wrought, the teeming hordes of witch-mages and pointy-eared folk and the penny-a-dozen Dark Lords that throng the unsavory underbelly of the publishing world, all straight out of the Elves 'r' Us cut-out catalogue, their derivative adventures puffing out thinly repetitive plots into plump, garishly bedragoned paperbacks whose weight far exceeds the value of the words they contain, then I am dead certain that the old Oxford don would shake his head ruefully, gather eight companions to himself and journey through hosts of bulbous, blackhead-studded geeks and shriveled Potterites and the evil marketers who rule them, until at last, bloody and haggard, his company in disarray, he reached Mount Doom, where he would heave the original manuscript of *The Lord of the Rings* into the destroying fires, thereby ending the age of Infinite Crap. Tolkien is, of course, not to blame for any of the semi-literate drudges who have either ripped him off or tried to dress their undernourished imaginations in cloaks of his design. The Ring books were a labor of scholarly playfulness, a meditation — it seems — on European history, testifying to the end of Old World passions and a cultural loss of innocence, and Tolkien could have had no idea that they would spawn such a glut of talentless imitators, and that they in turn would fund the loathsome industry of the fantasy trilogy, an enterprise rank and gross in nature that preys upon the cultivated idiocy of the consumer mentality, delivering paperweight-sized chunks of savory yet substanceless waste to an audience they have

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trained to thrive on garbage. It's a shame that Tolkien's work has not produced a more substantial printed legacy, for despite his often annoying obsessions (endless dinner parties, songs, and so forth), his trilogy stands as a landmark work in genre fiction; but at least it appears that now, thanks to Peter Jackson, a worthwhile cinematic legacy may be his.

To anyone who has ever tussled with the problem of how to skeletonize a five-hundred-page novel into a hundred-and-twenty-page screenplay, it should be apparent that Jackson has made the best movie it was possible to make when confronted with a work containing so many characters and so much plot; and it should be apparent to every reader/viewer that while Jackson has made some compressions in the story, in doing so, he has basically stuck to the book and been absolutely faithful to the spirit of Tolkien's intent. Everyone who has read the trilogy will have their quibbles — the Balrog was not quite right, say, or the troll wasn't how they imagined it — but this is to be expected. My main difficulty with the film was that the backstories of the characters, that of Strider in particular, were given such short shrift (according to those in the know, Jackson takes care of this problem in the second and third parts of the trilogy). But these quibbles aside, the story of Frodo the hobbit and the Fellowship, and their quest to carry the One Ring into Mordor and there destroy it, along with the power of the Dark Lord, has been crafted with loving attention to detail into the most visually spectacular movie in the history of the genre. The set pieces of the book are rendered wonderfully well, with Jackson taking CGI effects to the next plane, and the settings, the peaceful hobbit village, Rivendell, Lothlórien, the mines of Moria, Isengard, and all the rest are every bit as splendid as our imaginations have painted them to be. Indeed, the sequence of scenes in Moria surely must be ranked among the most effective long action sequences in cinematic history.

If *Fellowship* were merely visually satisfying, it might be counted a success, but it is accomplished on every level. Good movies begin with the good choices made by producers, and New Line's decision to give a relatively unknown director from New Zealand 270 million dollars to shoot three films at once deserves our applause and perhaps will teach a lesson to

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DreamWorks, which, seeking to avoid any risk, handed the Harry Potter franchise over to a maintenance man of a director, Chris Columbus, and achieved a predictably uninspired result. Jackson had previously made a cult comedy/horror movie, *Dead Alive;* a spoof of Jim Henson's Muppets, *Meet the Feebles;* an acclaimed yet thoroughly uncommercial picture, *Heavenly Creatures,* that dealt with a murder committed by two disturbed teenaged girls; and a forgettable Robert Zemeckis-produced Michael J. Fox vehicle, *The Frighteners.* Hardly the resumé to inflame the enthusiasm of the bean-counters. But in each of these films, Jackson demonstrated a prodigious visual imagination, and in *Creatures,* the movie that gave Kate Winslet her start, he displayed his cleverness in handling actors.

Except for the unrelentingly bland, albeit easy-to-look-at, Liv Tyler as the elf princess Arwen Undómiel, who is inserted into the early portions of the picture so as to provide a love interest for Strider, *Fellowship* is marvelously well-cast. But it is not an actor's movie, though Jackson has the wisdom to avoid drowning his players in the action, and makes certain they have enough room to establish their characters. He cannot give them a great deal of room, because there is so much plot business to get through; but he has made certain that the characters of all the Fellowship are there on screen, though it will take the three movies to present them each in full. Frodo, played with appropriate soulfulness by Elijah Wood, gets the lion's share of the screen time (perhaps a tad more than is necessary, as Jackson tends to rely too heavily on Wood's woebegone reactions). A chunkily earnest Sean Astin does the dutiful, dog-loyal Sam Gamgee to a turn. Grizzled Ian McKellen as Gandalf convinces us that wizards must have behaved just this way, and a majestically hirsute Christopher Lee as the newly evil Saruman makes us remember that this gifted actor's range extends far beyond the horror films for which he's best-known. John Rhys-Davies, who has done woeful duty in any number of awful genre projects, at last — as Gimli the dwarf — finds a quality stage upon which to strut his customary gruffness, and Sean Bean's Boromir is touchingly, pridefully human. Even the most flimsily realized of the company, Legolas the Elf (Orlando Bloom), is sufficiently defined through the action sequences, especially in his quicksil-

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ver bow-and-arrow work, though it will be helpful to see, as has been promised, the fleshing out of his relationship with Gimli in *The Two Towers*. But Viggo Mortensen is the actor likely to benefit most from the movie. Casting Mortensen in the role of Strider, the lean, scraggly, somewhat suspect heir-in-exile to the throne of Gondor, instead of going for a more bankable leading man, was a stroke of genius. Mortensen, one of Hollywood's best-kept secrets, is not only physically perfect for the part, but has the skill and presence to develop a complex character without employing much in the way of dialogue. Prior to *Fellowship*, his most substantial role was that of the miscreant brother in Sean Penn's *The Indian Runner*, based on a Bruce Springsteen song, "State Trooper." Following this, he took featured roles in a few B pictures, the excellent actioner, *American Yakuza*, among them. It was clear that he had ability, but the studios did not seem to know what to do with him, and since then he has been cast chiefly as a heavy in pictures such as *A Perfect Murder* and *The Prophecy*, wherein he played Satan. As Strider, Mortensen projects immense depth and presence, deftly externalizing his performance, and perhaps the studios may now recognize that looking a little dangerous is not such a bad thing for a leading man, and the role will have a similar effect on Mortensen's career as the role of Han Solo had on Harrison Ford's.

But in the end this is Peter Jackson's movie, his opportunity to shine, and he delivers the best genre flick since Kubrick's *2001*, and one of the best action movies ever. *Star Wars*? Forget it. Lucas's fanboy orgy was kindergarten stuff, finger-painting by contrast to the artfulness and power of *Fellowship*, and sinks lower in my estimation with each abysmally juvenile sequel. Jackson claims to have read *Lord of the Rings* dozens of times, and this shows not only in his faithfulness to the books, but in the touches he has added, which seem entirely of a piece with the products of Tolkien's imagination. The caverns beneath Isengard, for example, wherein he depicts the births of an army of Orcs from pods, lend the creatures an insectile aspect that expands Tolkien's original intent. And that is the salient difference between Columbus's dreary management of the Potter franchise and Jackson's painstaking direction of *Fellowship*. To Columbus it was a gig; to Jackson it was a love affair upon which

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he focused his own imagination, caring enough about the books not only to recreate them, but to expand and illuminate the text. Every scene in the movie resonates with his affection for the materials and his desire to infuse it with something of himself. The magical duel between Saruman and Gandalf; Gandalf's fireworks; the banshee wails and relentlessness of the Nazgul; the immense crumbling stairs of Moria; the hellish terrain of Isengard; the image of the warrior Sauron that opens the film amidst a battle that must have realized the wet dreams of Tolkien freaks everywhere; the Escher-on-Ecstasy atmosphere of Lothlórien; etc., etc. All these instances reflect both Tolkien and Jackson, the imprints of their sensibilities blending perfectly.

My fear after seeing the movie, after recognizing how well it would do, was that a spew of fantasy drivel would soon be voided from the orifices of the Hollywood beast, and that we would be forced to confront the awful specter of hastily achieved film versions of such immortal classics as *The Sword of Shannara* and remakes on the order of *Dragonheart: A New Beginning*. But now I think — at least I hope — that *Fellowship* may have raised the bar too high, that having seen the real thing, the audience will find that sitting through another lame-o fake has all the odorous appeal of being peed on by the family dog. It may be that we will see a number of rushed-out Tolkien imitations on film, but if we do, while they may prove as noxious as the novels that bred them, it's my feeling that they will at least be well-mounted. Perhaps this confidence is misplaced. It's possible that Hollywood will misapprehend what has been done with *Fellowship* and start grinding out sausage for the mass market, not comprehending that the mass palate has now been given a taste for filet mignon. But with the second and third sections of the Ring trilogy due out in the next two years, it's likely that shoddy imitations will not generate much in the way of consumer response. Not until the memory of Jackson's trilogy has faded, at any rate, and that most assuredly will not be for a very long time.

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Jeff Ford's previous contributions to our pages include "The Fantasy Writer's Assistant" and "The Honeyed Knot," the latter of which is due to be reprinted soon in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. *His latest novel,* The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque, *will be published later this year, as will his first collection of short fiction, entitled* The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories. *He lives in southern New Jersey.*

The earliest known creation myth is probably from Sumer, circa 3000 B.C. (It stars Nammu the primeval sea and An, the sky god). We've all heard many such myths since then, but it's unlikely you've ever encountered anything like this one.

Creation

By Jeffrey Ford

I LEARNED ABOUT CREATION from Mrs. Grimm, in the basement of her house around the corner from ours. The room was dimly lit by a stained-glass lamp positioned above the pool table. There was also a bar in the corner, behind which hung an electric sign that read *Rheingold* and held a can that endlessly poured golden beer into a pilsner glass that never seemed to overflow. That brew was liquid light, bright bubbles never ceasing to rise.

"Who made you?" she would ask, consulting that little book with the pastel-colored depictions of agony in hell and the angel-strewn clouds of heaven. She had the nose of a witch, one continuous eyebrow, and tea-cup-shiny skin — even the wrinkles seemed capable of cracking. Her smile was merely the absence of a frown, but she made candy apples for us at Halloween and marshmallow bricks in the shapes of wise men at Christmas. I often wondered how she had come to know so much about God and pictured saints with halos and cassocks playing pool and drinking beer in her basement at night.

We kids would page through our own copies of the catechism book to

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find the appropriate response, but before anyone else could answer, Amy Lash would already be saying, "God made me."

Then Richard Antonelli would get up and jump around, making fart noises through his mouth, and Mrs. Grimm would shake her head and tell him God was watching. I never jumped around, never spoke out of turn, for two reasons, neither of which had to do with God. One was what my father called his size ten, referring to his shoe, and the other was that I was too busy watching that sign over the bar, waiting to see the beer finally spill.

The only time I was ever distracted from my vigilance was when she told us about the creation of Adam and Eve. After God had made the world, he made them too, because he had so much love and not enough places to put it. He made Adam out of clay and blew life into him, and once he came to life, God made him sleep and then stole a rib and made the woman. After the illustration of a naked couple consumed in flame, being bitten by black snakes and poked by the fork of a pink demon with horns and bat wings, the picture for the story of the creation of Adam was my favorite. A bearded God in flowing robes leaned over a clay man, breathing blue-gray life into him.

That breath of life was like a great autumn wind blowing through my imagination, carrying with it all sorts of questions like pastel leaves that momentarily obscured my view of the beautiful flow of beer: Was dirt the first thing Adam tasted? Was God's beard brushing against his chin the first thing he felt? When he slept, did he dream of God stealing his rib and did it crack when it came away from him? What did he make of Eve and the fact that she was the only woman for him to marry? Was he thankful it wasn't Amy Lash?

Later on, I asked my father what he thought about the creation of Adam, and he gave me his usual response to any questions concerning religion. "Look," he said, "it's a nice story, but when you die you're food for the worms." One time my mother made him take me to church when she was sick, and he sat in the front row, directly in front of the priest. While everyone else was genuflecting and standing and singing, he just sat there staring, his arms folded and one leg crossed over the other. When they rang the little bell and everyone beat their chest, he laughed out loud.

No matter what I had learned in catechism about God and hell and the

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ten commandments, my father was hard to ignore. He worked two jobs, his muscles were huge, and once, when the neighbors' Doberman, big as a pony, went crazy and attacked a girl walking her poodle down our street, I saw him run outside with a baseball bat, grab the girl in one arm and then beat the dog to death as it tried to go for his throat. Throughout all of this he never lost the cigarette in the corner of his mouth and only put it out in order to hug the girl and quiet her crying.

"Food for the worms," I thought and took that thought along with a brown paper bag of equipment through the hole in the chain link fence into the woods that lay behind the school yard. Those woods were deep, and you could travel through them for miles and miles, never coming out from under the trees or seeing a backyard. Richard Antonelli hunted squirrels with a BB gun in them, and Bobby Lenon and his gang went there at night, lit a little fire and drank beer. Once, while exploring, I discovered a rain-sogged *Playboy*; once, a dead fox. Kids said there was gold in the creek that wound among the trees and that there was a far-flung acre that sank down into a deep valley where the deer went to die. For many years it was rumored that a monkey, escaped from a traveling carnival over in Brightwaters, lived in the treetops.

It was mid-summer and the dragonflies buzzed, the squirrels leaped from branch to branch, frightened sparrows darted away. The sun beamed in through gaps in the green above, leaving, here and there, shifting puddles of light on the pine-needle floor. Within one of those patches of light, I practiced creation. There was no clay, so I used an old log for the body. The arms were long, five-fingered branches that I positioned jutting out from the torso. The legs were two large birch saplings with plenty of spring for running and jumping. These I laid angled to the base of the log.

A large hunk of bark that had peeled off an oak was the head. On this I laid red mushroom eyes, curved barnacles of fungus for ears, a dried seed pod for a nose. The mouth was merely a hole I punched through the bark with my pen knife. Before affixing the fern hair to the top of the head, I slid beneath the curve of the sheet of bark those things I thought might help to confer life — a dandelion gone to ghostly seed, a cardinal's wing feather, a see-through quartz pebble, a twenty-five-cent compass. The ferns made a striking hairdo, the weeds, with their burr-like ends, formed a venerable

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beard. I gave him a weapon to hunt with: a long pointed stick that was my exact height.

When I was finished putting my man together, I stood and looked down upon him. He looked good. He looked ready to come to life. I went to the brown paper bag and took out my catechism book. Then kneeling near his right ear, I whispered to him all of the questions Mrs. Grimm would ever ask. When I got to the one, "What is Hell?" his left eye rolled off his face, and I had to put it back. I followed up the last answer with a quick promise never to steal a rib.

Putting the book back into the bag, I then retrieved a capped, cleaned-out baby-food jar. It had once held vanilla pudding, my little sister's favorite, but now it was filled with breath. I had asked my father to blow into it. Without asking any questions, he never looked away from the racing form, but took a drag from his cigarette and blew a long, blue-gray stream of air into it. I capped it quickly and thanked him. "Don't say I never gave you anything," he mumbled as I ran to my room to look at it beneath a bare light bulb. The spirit swirled within and then slowly became invisible.

I held the jar down to the mouth of my man, and when I couldn't get it any closer, I unscrewed the lid and carefully poured out every atom of breath. There was nothing to see, so I held it there a long time and let him drink it in. As I pulled the jar away, I heard a breeze blowing through the leaves; felt it on the back of my neck. I stood up quickly and turned around with a keen sense that someone was watching me. I got scared. When the breeze came again, it chilled me, for wrapped in it was the quietest whisper ever. I dropped the jar and ran all the way home.

That night as I lay in bed, the lights out, my mother sitting next to me, stroking my crewcut and softly singing, "Until the Real Thing Comes Along," I remembered that I had left my catechism book in the brown bag next to the body of the man. I immediately made believe I was asleep so that my mother would leave. Had she stayed, she would have eventually felt my guilt through the top of my head. When the door was closed over, I began to toss and turn, thinking of my man lying out there in the dark woods by himself. I promised God that I would go out there in the morning, get my book, and take my creation apart. With the first bird song in the dark of the new day, I fell asleep and dreamed I was in Mrs. Grimm's

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basement with the saints. A beautiful woman saint with a big rose bush thorn sticking right in the middle of her forehead told me, "Your man's name is Cavanaugh."

"Hey, that's the name of the guy who owns the deli in town," I told her.

"Great head cheese at that place," said a saint with a baby lamb under his arm.

Another big bearded saint used the end of a pool cue to cock back his halo. He leaned over me and asked, "Why did God make you?"

I reached for my book but realized I had left it in the woods.

"Come on," he said, "that's one of the easiest ones."

I looked away at the bar, stalling for time while I tried to remember the answer, and just then the glass on the sign overflowed and spilled onto the floor.

The next day, my man, Cavanaugh, was gone. Not a scrap of him left behind. No sign of the red feather or the clear pebble. This wasn't a case of someone having come along and maliciously scattered him. I searched the entire area. It was a certainty that he had risen up, taken his spear and the brown paper bag containing my religious instruction book, and walked off into the heart of the woods.

Standing in the spot where I had given him life, my mind spiraled with visions of him loping along on his birch legs, branch fingers pushing aside sticker bushes and low hanging leaves, his fern hair slicked back by the wind. Through those red mushroom eyes, he was seeing his first day. I wondered if he was as frightened to be alive as I was to have made him, or had the breath of my father imbued him with a grim food-for-the-worms courage? Either way, there was no dismantling him now — Thou shalt not kill. I felt a grave responsibility and went in search of him.

I followed the creek, thinking he would do the same, and traveled deeper and deeper into the woods. What was I going to say to him, I wondered, when I finally found him and his simple hole of a mouth formed a question? It wasn't clear to me why I had made him, but it had something to do with my father's idea of death — a slow rotting underground; a cold dreamless sleep longer than the universe. I passed the place where I had discovered the dead fox and there picked up Cavanaugh's trail — holes poked in the damp ground by the stride of his birch legs. Stopping, I looked

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all around through the jumbled stickers and bushes, past the trees, and detected no movement but for a single leaf silently falling.

I journeyed beyond the Antonelli brothers' lean-to temple where they hung their squirrel skins to dry and brewed sassafras tea. I even circled the pond, passed the tree whose bark had been stripped in a spiral by lightning, and entered territory I had never seen before. Cavanaugh seemed to stay always just ahead of me, out of sight. His snake-hole footprints, bent and broken branches, and that barely audible and constant whisper on the breeze that trailed in his wake drew me on into the late afternoon until the woods began to slowly fill with night. Then I had a thought of home: my mother cooking dinner and my sister playing on a blanket on the kitchen floor; the Victrola turning out The Ink Spots. I ran back along my path, and somewhere in my flight I heard a loud cry, not bird nor animal nor human, but like a thick limb splintering free from an ancient oak.

I ignored the woods as best I could for the rest of the summer. There was basketball, and games of guns with all of the children in the neighborhood ranging across everyone's backyard, trips to the candy store for comic books, late night horror movies on Chiller Theatre. I caught a demon jab of hell for having lost my religious instruction book, and all of my allowance for four weeks went toward another. Mrs. Grimm told me God knew I had lost it and that it would be a few weeks before she could get me a replacement. I imagined her addressing an envelope to heaven. In the meantime, I had to look on with Amy Lash. She'd lean close to me, pointing out every word that was read aloud, and when Mrs. Grimm asked me a question, catching me concentrating on the infinite beer, Amy would whisper the answers without moving her lips and save me. Still, no matter what happened, I could not completely forget about Cavanaugh. I thought my feeling of responsibility would wither as the days swept by; instead it grew like a weed.

On a hot afternoon at the end of July, I was sitting in my secret hideout, a bower formed by forsythia bushes in the corner of my backyard, reading the latest installment of *Nick Fury*. I only closed my eyes to rest them for a moment, but there was Cavanaugh's rough-barked face. Now that he was alive, leaves had sprouted all over his trunk and limbs. He wore a strand of wild blueberries around where his neck should have been, and his hair ferns had grown and deepened their shade of green. It wasn't

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just a daydream, I tell you. I knew that I was seeing him, what he was doing, where he was, at that very minute. He held his spear as a walking stick, and it came to me then that he was, of course, a vegetarian. His long thin legs bowed slightly, his log of a body shifted, as he cocked back his curled, wooden parchment of a head and stared with mushroom eyes into a beam of sunlight slipping through the branches above. Motes of pollen swirled in the light, chipmunks, squirrels, deer silently gathered, sparrows landed for a brief moment to nibble at his hair and then were gone. All around him, the woods looked on in awe as one of its own reckoned the beauty of the sun. What lungs, what vocal chords, gave birth to it, I'm not sure, but he groaned; a sound I had witnessed one other time while watching my father asleep, wrapped in a nightmare.

I visited that spot within the yellow blossomed forsythias once a day to check up on my man's progress. All that was necessary was that I sit quietly for a time until in a state of near-nap and then close my eyes and fly my brain around the corner, past the school, over the treetops, then down into the cool green shadow of the woods. Many times I saw him just standing, as if stunned by life, and many times traipsing through some unknown quadrant of his Eden. With each viewing came a confused emotion of wonder and dread, like on the beautiful windy day at the beginning of August when I saw him sitting beside the pond, holding the catechism book upside down, a twig finger of one hand pointing to each word on the page, while the other hand covered all but one red eye of his face.

I was there when he came across the blackened patch of earth and scattered beers from one of the Lenon gang's nights in the woods. He lifted a partially crushed can with backwash still sloshing in the bottom and drank it down. The bark around his usually indistinct hole of a mouth magically widened into a smile. It was when he uncovered a half a pack of Camels and a book of matches that I realized he must have been spying on the revels of Lenon, Cho-cho, Mike Stone, and Jake Harwood from the safety of the night trees. He lit up and the smoke swirled out the back of his head. In a voice like the creaking of a rotted branch, he pronounced, "Fuck."

And most remarkable of all was the time he came to the edge of the woods, to the hole in the chain link fence. There, in the playground across the field, he saw Amy Lash, gliding up and back on the swing, her red

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gingham dress billowing, her bright hair full of motion. He trembled as if planted in earthquake earth, and squeaked the way the sparrows did. For a long time, he crouched in that portal to the outside world and watched. Then, gathering his courage, he stepped onto the field. The instant he was out of the woods, Amy must have felt his presence, and she looked up and saw him approaching. She screamed, jumped off the swing, and ran out of the playground. Cavanaugh, frightened by her scream, retreated to the woods, and did not stop running until he reached the tree struck by lightning.

My religious instruction book finally arrived from above, summer ended and school began, but still I went every day to my hideout and watched him for a little while as he fished gold coins from the creek or tracked, from the ground, something moving through the treetops. I know it was close to Halloween, because I sat in my hideout loosening my teeth on one of Mrs. Grimm's candy apples when I realized that my secret seeing place was no longer a secret. The forsythias had long since dropped their flowers. As I sat there in the skeletal blind, I could feel the cold creeping into me. "Winter is coming," I said in a puff of steam and had one fleeting vision of Cavanaugh, his leaves gone flame red, his fern hair drooping brown, discovering the temple of dead squirrels. I saw him gently touch the fur of a stretched-out corpse hung on the wall. His birch legs bent to nearly breaking as he fell to his knees and let out a wail that drilled into me and lived there.

It was late night, a few weeks later, but that cry still echoed through me and I could not sleep. I heard, above the sound of the dreaming house, my father come in from his second job. I don't know what made me think I could tell him, but I had to tell someone. If I kept to myself what I had done any longer, I thought I would have to run away. Crawling out of bed, I crept down the darkened hallway past my sister's room and heard her breathing. I found my father sitting in the dining room, eating a cold dinner and reading the paper by only the light coming through from the kitchen. All he had to do was look up at me and I started crying. Next thing I knew, he had his arm around me and I was enveloped in the familiar aroma of machine oil. I thought he might laugh, I thought he might yell, but I told him everything all at once. What he did was pull out the chair next to his. I sat down, drying my eyes.

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"What can we do?" he asked.

"I just need to tell him something," I said.

"Okay," he said. "This Saturday, we'll go to the woods and see if we can find him." Then he had me describe Cavanaugh, and when I was done he said, "Sounds like a sturdy fellow."

We moved into the living room and sat on the couch in the dark. He lit a cigarette and told me about the woods when he was a boy; how vast they were, how he trapped mink, saw eagles, how he and his brother lived for a week by their wits alone out in nature. I eventually dozed off and only half woke when he carried me to my bed.

The week passed and I went to sleep Friday night, hoping he wouldn't forget his promise and go to the track instead. But the next morning, he woke me early from a dream of Amy Lash by tapping my shoulder and saying, "Move your laggardly ass." He made bacon and eggs, the only two things he knew how to make, and let me drink coffee. Then we put on our coats and were off. It was the second week in November and the day was cold and overcast. "Brisk," he said as we rounded the corner toward the school, and that was all he said until we were well in beneath the trees.

I showed him around the woods like a tour guide, pointing out the creek, the spot where I had created my man, the temple of dead squirrels. "Interesting," he said to each of these, and once in a while mentioned the name of some bush or tree. Waves of leaves blew amidst the trunks in the cold wind, and with stronger gusts, showers of them fell around us. He could really walk and we walked for what seemed ten miles, out of the morning and into the afternoon, way past any place I had ever dreamed of going. We discovered a spot where an enormous tree had fallen, exposing the gnarled brainwork of its roots, and another two acres where there were no trees but only smooth sand hills. All the time, I was alert to even the slightest sound, a cracking twig, the caw of a crow, hoping I might hear the whisper.

As it grew later, the sky darkened and what was cold before became colder still.

"Listen," my father said, "I have a feeling like the one when we used to track deer. He's nearby, somewhere. We'll have to outsmart him."

I nodded.

"I'm going to stay here and wait," he said. "You keep going along the

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path here for a while, but, for Christ's sake, be quiet. Maybe if he sees you, he'll double back to get away, and I'll be here to catch him."

I wasn't sure this plan made sense, but I knew we needed to do something. It was getting late. "Be careful," I said, "he's big and he has a stick."

My father smiled. "Don't worry," he said and lifted his foot to indicate the size ten.

This made me laugh, and I turned and started down the path, taking careful steps. "Go on for about ten minutes or so and see if you see anything," he called to me before I rounded a bend.

Once I was by myself, I wasn't so sure I wanted to find my man. Because of the overcast sky the woods were dark and lonely. As I walked I pictured my father and Cavanaugh wrestling each other and wondered who would win. When I had gone far enough to want to stop and run back, I forced myself around one more turn. Just this little more, I thought. He's probably already fallen apart anyway, dismantled by winter. But then I saw it up ahead, treetops at eye level, and I knew I had found the valley where the deer went to die.

Cautiously, I inched up to the rim, and peered down the steep dirt wall overgrown with roots and stickers, into the trees and the shadowed undergrowth beneath them. The valley was a large hole as if a meteor had struck there long ago. I thought of the treasure trove of antlers and bones that lay hidden in the leaves at its base. Standing there, staring, I felt I almost understood the secret life and age of the woods. I had to show this to my father, but before I could move away, I saw something, heard something moving below. Squinting to see more clearly through the darkness down there, I could just about make out a shadowed figure standing, half hidden by the trunk of a tall pine.

"Cavanaugh?" I called. "Is that you?"

In the silence, I heard acorns dropping.

"Are you there?" I asked.

There was a reply, an eerie sound that was part voice, part wind. It was very quiet but I distinctly heard it ask, "Why?"

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Why?" came the same question.

I didn't know why, and wished I had read him the book's answers

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instead of the questions the day of his birth. I stood for a long time and watched as snow began to fall around me.

His question came again, weaker this time, and I was on the verge of tears, ashamed of what I had done. Suddenly, I had a strange memory flash of the endless beer in Mrs. Grimm's basement. At least it was something. I leaned out over the edge and, almost certain I was lying, yelled, "I had too much love."

Then, so I could barely make it out, I heard him whisper, "Thank you."

After that, there came from below the thud of branches hitting together, hitting the ground, and I knew he had come undone. When I squinted again, the figure was gone.

I found my father sitting on a fallen tree trunk back along the trail, smoking a cigarette. "Hey," he said when he saw me coming, "did you find anything?"

"No," I said, "let's go home."

He must have seen something in my eyes, because he asked, "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," I said.

The snow fell during our journey home and seemed to continue falling all winter long.

Now, twenty-one years married with two crewcut boys of my own, I went back to the old neighborhood last week. The woods and even the school have been obliterated, replaced by new developments with streets named for the things they banished — Crow Lane, Deer Street, Gold Creek Road. My father still lives in the same house by himself. My mother passed away some years back. My baby sister is married with two boys of her own and lives upstate. The old man has something growing on his kidney, and he has lost far too much weight, his once huge arms having shrunk to the width of branches. He sat at the kitchen table, the racing form in front of him. I tried to convince him to quit working, but he shook his head and said, "Boring."

"How long do you think you can keep going to the shop?" I asked him.

"How about until the last second," he said.

"How's the health?" I asked.

"Soon I'll be food for the worms," he said, laughing.

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"How do you really feel about that?" I asked.

He shrugged. "All part of the game," he said. "I thought when things got bad enough I would build a coffin and sleep in it. That way, when I die, you can just nail the lid on and bury me in the backyard."

Later, when we were watching the Giants on TV and I had had a few beers, I asked him if he remembered that time in the woods.

He closed his eyes and lit a cigarette as though it would help his memory. "Oh, yeah, I think I remember that," he said.

I had never asked him before. "Was that you down there in those trees?"

He took a drag and slowly turned his head and stared hard, without a smile, directly into my eyes. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about," he said and exhaled a long, blue-gray stream of life.

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Don Webb's sly, unusual stories have appeared in scores, possibly hundreds, of markets over the past two decades. His books include Uncle Ovid's Exercise Book, Essential Saltes, The Double, *and* Endless Honeymoon. *He lives in Austin, Texas, and knows a lot of esoteric things, not the least of which is where the reference to Harry Stephen Keeler lies buried in this story.*

Don says he is teaching a summer class in Writing Science Fiction for UCLA extension (uclaextension.com), and that he is looking for a few great students. If you're thinking of applying, do not — repeat, not *— attempt the following exercise at home. This is the work of a trained professional. These stunts might look easy, but...*

Our Novel

By Don Webb

UPON MY RECENT DIAGNOSIS with Carson's Syndrome, I realized that it was time to talk about the creation of *Wilson Is Not Toast*, which has the dubious distinction of being mentioned in every book on the oddball novels of the early twenty-first century. *Wilson Is Not Toast* did very well, even being a Mystery Club Book of the Month and having translations into twenty languages and adaptations for the WWW, film, TV, and other media. If you are at all a mystery reader, you probably have a copy at home. What makes *WINT* so interesting is that it had eleven co-authors. Jointly written books seldom do well, but the author list for *WINT* has several other peculiarities. Firstly all of the authors had had only one publishing credit before the publication of *WINT*, in a regionally distributed short story collection, which was aptly described as "dreadful vanity publishing at its worst." Secondly, despite the huge success of the book, only three of the writers went on to publish anything thereafter and their minor attempts were frankly published because of their connection with the successful *Wilson Is Not Toast*. I was the best published of the three.

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I am Moses Gubb, and I went on from my success with *WINT* into a writing "career" of seven mystery short stories and a cookbook of recipes by mystery/thriller writers, *Sleuth Stew*. I am very grateful to the editors of *Has-Beens on Parade* for this opportunity to share these reminiscences from my early career. I know that many people would be offended at being solicited by such a fanzine, but I am not in total denial on my lack of writing success, and I feel that my work in *WINT* is one of the most satisfying of my life.

First let me tell you a little about myself. Not that I was born and so forth, you probably have a good idea about that, no, I want to explain the late twentieth century to you. Everyone wanted to be a writer, because a good deal of effort in the craft seemed to have been removed. My mother had told me with horror that in her first job she had a manual typewriter. It was one of those tales of "how bad it was" that ranked up there with the idea of a TV without remote control. There were all kinds of software in those days that helped you write. They formatted the text, they prompted you with both words and plot, and they even encouraged you if you stopped writing due to some form of block. I remember when the first time my computer got the (as it was then called) World Wide Web. It was as much of a breakthrough then as doing away with keyboards had been a few years before.

My job[1] or as we said then, my job, was manager of a video store in Austin, Texas. It was the "cool" video store next to New Atlantis, which was a used bookstore, and a bar called the Decline of West. It didn't pay for shit, but it did bring in a steady group of artistic people. Austin was sort of a writers' colony in those days. You couldn't spit without hitting a published author. I know because I spit a lot, mainly just at the people walking by into Violet Crown Videos. My girlfriend worked for me and made even less. We considered ourselves to be as cool as our videos. But we had one tragic secret. Unlike our clientele, we hadn't achieved in any art form. Now, we were smart enough to see writers don't have any money, or they wouldn't have grumbled so at the dollar-a-day late fee on their DVD's (I'm guessing that the readership of *HBOP* is historically savvy enough to pick up on most of my quaint terms. If they ain't that's too bad because I'm not being paid for this). But everyone was working on something. Neal, the stock boy, was working on a screenplay, Susan on

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her novel, and Tagi on an opera. Belinda, my girlfriend, had done some painting that we used to fix a hole in the roof of our garage. I had learned to play "Stairway to Heaven" on the guitar, and even worked in a band that got to play at a couple of parties, until some drunk guy threw our drummer into the river. But we began to get the wannabe spirit.

How tough could writing be? After all, New Atlantis was filled with it, clearly most of it turned out by people less smart than us, if not in fact less talented. I asked Mary Denning, a founder of the Contrarians, a school of Austin writers, what her secret was. "Persistence," she said. I figured I could try that a while, at least until it got boring. Picking what to write was the next hurdle. I asked all the writers that came in what sold, and they all said mysteries. So I got some mystery writing software, and I took off. My first novel was entitled *The Woman with Three Breasts*. I thought my grand climax was stunning, "She gazed horrified at one of three breasts. *It was made of wax.*" It took me months to write and despite my sending it to three or four publishers, I couldn't sell it. Therefore, I decided to try my hand at short fiction. That way I wouldn't spend so long at creating the thing.

Meantime Belinda was trying a more social approach. She had joined a group of people that wanted to write mysteries called People Who Want to Write Mysteries (PWWtWM) or as they affectionately called it, "Pootem." The group brought famous people in the field of mystery writing to Austin — agents and publishers and such — which would surely snap up some of the locally produced delicacies. So we both attended and shelled out money for workshops. We watched other people being published left and right. In fact, at our first workshop the woman who had sat to the left of me and the man who had sat to the right of me both sold a mystery novel in a month.

Was there some cosmic conspiracy against us?

I wrote many short stories in those days, "The Dairy Queen Murders," "The Jell-O Slayer," "The Pork and Bean Menace." But none of them sold. One was even returned to me with a thin pencil scrawl, "It's the food guy again." I would show them. I tried writing about drinks.

About this time Horace Greenslau came on the scene. Horace appeared in the form of unsolicited e-mail (or as we called it in those halcyon days, "Spam"). Horace presented himself to the brethren and cistern of

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Pootem as a wily old publisher with many tricks up his ink-stained sleeves. He pointed out two facts. Fact number one: the second sale is easier to make than the first, so if you want to be a published author, the best thing you can be is already published. Fact number two: you don't have to pay dead guys anything but respect. His e-mails to Pootem just talked about these ideas, he said he just kept thinking about them.

So one day I sent a note to this list saying why not put them together? You could put a book that was half stuff by dead guys that you didn't have to pay any money to, and half by living guys that were first time writers.

What a great idea! wrote Greenslau.

It became his project at once. He had spots for eleven writers, mixed with eleven classics of detection. It would be called *Mystery Classics*. He had some has-been guy, D. B. Bowen, author of *The Cellophane Fawn Trilogy*, on hand to write an intro for five hundred smackers. He would mention the twenty tales one by one and thus give illusion that the new guys ranked up there with Chandler, Borges, Doyle, and so forth. The classics were great, from literary to hard-boiled, impressionistic to great logic tales. There was only one rub.

Money.

He didn't want to do it as a vanity press, no, that was evil. He simply needed each of his writers to buy — say — two hundred copies. They could easily sell them to libraries, specialty shops, their friends and relatives. What proud momma wouldn't buy a book that listed her baby son after Agatha Christie? He would sell the rest.

I know what you are thinking. Well, it's easy to think things like that when fame isn't around the corner and some guy is telling you that you can sell two hundred books.

Belinda and I figured it this way. I could put a display of the books for sale at the store, plus I could take a suitcase full of them to our family reunions, then when the store sold off its used videos at the flea market in the spring I could sell a few more copies then. Before long we could sell our four hundred.

So we coughed up the cash and we wrote our tales. Mine was "The Butcher Wore Red" and hers was "The Video Store Murders." Nine other people in Pootem likewise coughed up the cash.

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The books took a long time to materialize. Since we had never met Greenslau, we began to wonder if we had been scammed.

When the books did show up, they were as nicely produced as we had imagined for the rather hefty price we had put out. Belinda and I had visualized them as leather bound with gilt lettering and quaint illustrations (at least for the real classics). Greenslau had also asked each of us for a black-and-white photo. I guess he had merely asked for his collection, there weren't any pictures in the book.

Bowen's introduction was a little weird too. He wrote very perceptive things about the classic tales, but made fun of us. For example, "In Moses Gubb's 'The Butcher Wore Red' we see an interesting attempt to turn a food obsession into a tale of detection. Although the astute reader will have guessed the identity of the killer long before the end of the tale, his obsessive writing will have a special appeal for a certain type of reader interested in the workings of the authorial mind." Sad to say, mine was not the worst.

But it was a book. It had an ISBN number. It, for the most part, spelled our names right, and it was a *hardback,* not something easily recycled. It would live on in libraries and bookshelves of our friends.

To my surprise and initial glee, I was listed as the editor. Greenslau had sent a note when everyone's book was delivered reminding him or her it had been my idea.

The local paper reviewed us. The reviewer liked all the things the dead people had written. It called the editor "only half bad."

Our relatives did buy copies. But our friends couldn't afford them. Local specialty shops like Adventures in Crime and Space were willing to buy a couple, but the look of pity in the eyes of the owner didn't make us feel very good.

You know, *nobody* buys expensive anthologies at flea markets. But some people did ask our advice on how to get published. Then I started getting little nasty notes from my fellow authors. They had all laid out nearly three thousand dollars apparently for the purpose of losing closet space. Nobody blamed Greenslau; everyone remembered that I had thought it up. Your most noble moments may be like the seeds of a dandelion, but e-mail lives forever. (Well, at least it did in those uncivilized days.)

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A year passed. We did our best to sell copies. One of our members, a dentist, did sell his off to his clients, but he offered them a price break on his services. The few books we gave away as review copies showed up in used bookstores around town, anchors in the cheap bins. I lost my friends in the group. I lost Belinda for other reasons, but when she left me, her copies of the book stayed in the garage. Fine. I made a pile of them and propped up a roof beam.

I became guilty. I felt that it was my fault. The least I could do was buy up the cheap copies of the books around town. They usually went for one or two bucks. I made a game of it, wearing dark glasses and pulling a hat over my face, I would go out and bag a few on nights of the new moon.

I don't know how many copies I had bought before I discovered that there were variant editions of *Mystery Classics*. One night I opened one up. There were tales by the eleven masters and eleven people I had never heard of. There was an introduction by D. B. Bowen for eleven writers — all of whom lived in Houston, Texas.

So I went out in my garage. The books looked the same on the outside, but close inspection soon revealed that I owned the Santa Fe, Dallas, and Anchorage versions of *Mystery Classics*. I drove to the copy shop and began shooting copies of the alternate title pages. Each edition had its own editor, some fall guy (or in the case of Anchorage fall gal) that had had the same "brilliant" idea that I had had. I spent all night addressing envelopes. I wanted all the Austin writers to know. To know that I hadn't done it. To know that somewhere Mr. Greenslau was traveling from town to town raking in the dough from would-be writers. I had to use snail mail; they wouldn't take my calls anymore.

At first my fellow writers weren't concerned. Most of them apologized to me. We talked a little about contacting the other victims, but mainly we were embarrassed. Most of us had had friends that had warned us that the whole thing smelled like a scam, and we were embarrassed. But Belinda changed all that. She set up a mailing list for us all and she wrote a really impassioned letter about how I had been screwed over. She told them that I had paid for her books, and that I had bought all the copies, and that I had taken all their abuse (including hers), and that I had let them know what had happened. She was really mad at Greenslau, and when people realized that I was out over six thousand dollars, they got mad too.

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I think it was Dr. Ellison, the dentist, who suggested that we should get our revenge. We agreed early on but we didn't know how.

Belinda began researching the place that had printed all the books, it was in Polk City, Iowa. Other than printing *Classic Mysteries*, they did Bibles in Spanish and menus. Their equipment was old, and the *CM* line kept them going. They were very friendly, and were glad to give her a list of cities that had had *CM*s made up. We looked it over. Greenslau had neglected New Orleans. We couldn't guess why, maybe he thought the bunco squad there was too good. So we got a local ISP and we made a group, Crescent City Crime Writers. We got us a webpage, we took out some ads in the *New Orleans Picayune*, and we mentioned our name on a few mystery news groups. We had people that wanted to join of course, but we told them that we had already filled our meeting space — some unspecified loft on Canal Street — and that it would be a while before we were taking members, but they were free to chat. We adopted pseudonyms, we chatted, and we even learned some things about the city of New Orleans and its rich mystery tradition. Eventually someone made the observation that it is sure easy to get published if you already are published. His name was Redslaw. Mr. Redslaw went on to tell us that the reason dead guys are reprinted is that they sell and you don't have to pay them.

Therefore, I went on-line as Mr. Phineas Thibodaux, an honest but poor man of the parishes with a great marketing strategy....

Mr. Redslaw thought my notion of an anthology of half classic and half virgin talent was nothing short of genius. He said he could get a has-been writer, a Mr. D. B. Bowen, author of *The Cellophane Fawn Trilogy*, to write an introduction.

Here is where we made our move. We said that we wanted to meet him, Mr. Bowen, of course. We had figured out that much.

At first there was reluctance. Redslaw told us that Bowen was reclusive, alcoholic, etc. We stuck to our guns, and Belinda had a brilliant idea. She researched Bowen. He had written five avant-garde novels in the eighties. The *CFT* had been marginally successful. He had been on the list of several critics as *the* young writer to watch. He had speaking tours, was a minor TV celeb, but each novel got stranger and the readership declined. He even tried vanity publishing with — you guessed it — the Menu House in Polk City.

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So in addition to our wanting to see him, we began to say good things about his work.

There isn't a writer alive that doesn't believe flattery. The entire strange cursed race thinks that someday their scribblings will have a place in God's eternal bookshelf.

Our plan was a little vague. We thought that we would get him in a hotel room and then just confront him and in some magical way he would pay us back the money he had sucked away.

We chose an older hotel in the French Quarter called the Roosevelt. We rented the big penthouse that had looked over Mardi Gras for almost a hundred years. It was bleak December. We told him to meet us at eight on a Wednesday night. We dressed well, and those of us who had concealed weapons permits from Texas were packing. We had no intention of killing him, just scaring him into the straight and narrow.

Belinda had a tape recorder so we could catch any confessions that might boil to the surface.

He was fifteen minutes late. We were sweating and uncomfortable. We heard the old elevator make its way to our floor. Belinda and a woman named Chandra Lee escorted him to our suite. He was older and thinner than we had thought. We had our chairs arranged in a circle, his was in the middle. He laughed when he saw it. We guessed he wouldn't be laughing soon.

After he had sat down, we all reached under our chairs and pulled out a copy of *Mystery Classics*, except for me. I pulled out five copies — one of each of the editions I had bought. We were expecting fear or guilt.

We were disappointed.

He just asked, "So which group are you? Shreveport? Dallas? No, I guess it's too long for it to be Dallas."

I said, "We're Austin and we want our money back."

"Oh, that's original," he said, relaxing in his chair. "About as original as your fiction." Then he laughed.

"Look, Bowen, we're not fooling around," said Dr. Ellison.

"Of course you are," said Bowen, "That's all you've ever done. You're jerk-offs. What do you want from me? You said you wanted to be published. Well, you got your book. It's big, it's fat. I bet all of you have discovered the great utility it has for propping things up. You should be as

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happy as a pig in slop. But no, what you wanted wasn't to pay three thousand dollars so that your useless names would be printed alongside people that would sneer at your ineptitude. You wanted more. You are disappointed that I am not Satan. You wanted to sell your souls for fame. Well, you don't have souls, or you could have written something worthwhile. You don't got shit."

"No, Bowen," I said. "We've got you."

"You think you're the first group that has pieced this together. You're not, and you're not the last. But everything I did was legal. I knew this was a confrontation when I walked down here. Night meeting in an old hotel in the French Quarter, the same old clichéd stuff that keeps your fiction from selling. I just wanted to see your pathetic faces, look at you, all dressed up, all proper; does it make you feel powerful? Your little chairs all in a circle. Well, I'm going now, and you can go back to your lives and tiny dreams."

"Do you think you are a good writer, Bowen?"

"I'm no Rex Hull but I'm okay. I'm third-rate, but my ambition is too great. So I look for eighteenth-rate scum to support me."

He rose.

"No," said Dr. Ellison. "We are not done with you."

"Why, what are you going to do, kill me?"

"Yes," Dr. Ellison said. "We are. Just because you aren't expecting it. It is a sign of the triumph of our poor imaginations.

We were on him in a minute. Eleven people can overpower a man in his sixties easily. Killing him is easier still.

Taking a corpse through the French Quarter is not a difficult matter when he is small. You simply stand on either side of him and tell onlookers that he has had too much to drink. In fact as we took him to my car, we passed another fellow in the same straits. Perhaps he too was dead.

We took him to my cousin's restaurant. We sat outside until closing time. My cousin and I had an agreement. He did not ask about things that he didn't want to hear the answer to, and I treated his life the same way.

We made Mr. D. B. Bowen into jambalaya. The other men butchered him, while I prolapsed the rice and sauce as per the recipe in my story. He was ready at dawn, and we filled up our containers with him and took him

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to our homes in Austin. Just before we took off, Belinda said, "Well, he's toast now." I most emphatically denied that he was toast, and took offense at the slighting of my culinary creation. "Okay," she said, "He is not toast."

We were prepared to be each other's alibis when the law came by.

It never came.

Bowen did live alone. He was the alcoholic recluse he claimed to be. Eventually the residence hotel he lived in in Washington must have noticed that their tenant had not returned.

The others had sworn off writing, but I turned out a few tales afterward — some of which sold. I felt my fiction getting better, and attributed it to some endorphin released after revenge.

About six months later, Belinda was listening to Bowen's speech in the Roosevelt Penthouse. She called me and said that it was very dramatic. The whole thing would make a lovely crime novel. So we broke it into eleven chapters. Each of us did our best. And unlike most of our scribbling before and after, our best was finally good enough. Sure, the novel sold as something of a curiosity, like *Naked Came the Stranger*, but it did sell. We had a few minutes of fame — woefully short of the fifteen minutes that a man named Andy Warhol had promised our parents' generation.

The success of the book, plus my modest sales before its publication, inspired everyone to try writing again. We had all felt the writing we did on *WINT* had been smooth and beautiful. We were all able to get agents on the strengths of *WINT*'s sales, and we were busy turning out novel proposals. But something was wrong.

The quality left our writing. At first we hid this each from the other. All right, at first we hid it from ourselves, a writer cannot bear to acknowledge that his best days may be gone — especially if his best days were about a month in length. However, by the time the movie of *WINT* came out, our writing was as bad as it had been in *Classic Mysteries*. We didn't know what had happened. Had the crime been enough to stimulate our moribund muses?

Dr. Ellison suggested a different explanation. Over half a century before, certain experiments on planaria learning had suggested that cannibalism led to the exchange of knowledge. The planaria, a type of flatworm, were tested with a maze and their times recorded. Then the

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planaria were ground up and fed to a new generation, who could solve the maze in less time than their predecessors. It was speculated that there was a transference of knowledge — probably in the messenger RNA strands of the planaria. The experiment was later discredited, as some researchers believed that the mazes were contaminated by the smell of the flatworm's passage and that was the guiding force. However, certain people believed that the experiments were discredited to keep universities from turning into professor-hamburger stands.

Hoc est corpus meum.

Maybe we had eaten Bowen's talent. Unlike him, we were not jaded nor overcome by a desire to be known in a limited genre — we were just people with a burning desire to write, but perhaps nothing to say. Our desire plus his RNA got one more novel out of him. It was sad that he never got the fame, which he, like us, had craved. The RNA material must have peaked in us about nine months after the deed and receded nine months afterward.

Our reaction to Dr. Ellison's theory varied. Some of us were glad at our one shot at fame and parlayed it into little victories like my cookbook. Others drank themselves to death like Belinda, who could never face the fact she had no talent. Of course the best known case — the one you've been reading this interview to see if I would mention — see, I still have a few mystery writer tricks even if I am eighteenth-rate — was Dr. Ellison. One of the good dentist's clients was Vernon Ghosh, a well-known writer of techno-thrillers. Ellison gassed him when he was in for his yearly dental visit and then cut up his body with an eye to making lasagna from it. The unfortunate visit of a young man with a chipped tooth exposed Ellison's attempt at cannibalism.

Ironically it led to new interest in our work and a re-release of *WINT*, which has remained in print since. We all denied any understanding of his actions, and if in our black hearts we had been thinking of a similar deed, we abandoned such evil schemes.

Although not quite the youngest of our little group of wannabes, I am the last to draw breath, and I will not do so for much longer. I enjoyed sharing our story for *Has-Beens on Parade*.

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We're happy to report that fatherhood has not slowed down the prolific writing habits of Mr. Reed, who promises to continue the saga of Raven in short order. (There are also rumors emanating from Lincoln, Nebraska, of a secret novel in the works.) His latest story is short and sharp.

Trouble Is

By Robert Reed

"THE TROUBLE IS," HE BEGINS. Then he unleashes his explanation, though I can follow precious little of what he tells me. He recites ropes of numbers and random syllables masquerading as words. He discusses protocols and conscious files and unconscious files, and there's talk about ether elves and tag trolls, and something called a kick-ass intellect. He assumes that I am intimate with these terms. It's touching, really, to see his earnest faith in my own kick-ass intellect. But in these obscure realms, I am an ignorant-silly, and I lack the heart to confess my ignorance to him. I sit quietly, a pretty image nodding. I try to act involved and erudite about everything he says. And then he stops talking for no apparent reason, except perhaps that he is satisfied with his own cleverness. He smiles, happy to find my eyes fixed on him. Then with a flirtatious wink, he says, "In the shell of a nut, that's your trouble."

"Gosh," I exclaim.

Which amuses him. He laughs and leans back in the chair that I wove for the body that he brought here. It is a fit, modern body. It's the end result

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of much consideration, I'm sure. The man has a fondness for thick blond hair and broad muscular shoulders, but the legs have been left long and thin — appendages rarely used in his sessile life. His face probably has a strong resemblance to his real face. The sharp cheeks and a broad chin are most certainly invented. His even and unnaturally white teeth look equally fictitious. But the mouth is a little too large and the nose is far too regular. I know more than most about personal appearance, and I do understand men. This man has worked with one of the more popular packages, creating an image that he hopes will impress me. He wants to look his best, no doubt. The trouble is, he doesn't understand what it is that is best about him.

Smiling with my perfect mouth, I ask, "But can you help me?"

"Easily," he promises. Then he shifts his illusionary weight, betraying nervousness. "It'll take some time," he warns, fighting to appear perfectly confident. "But I can fix pretty much anything."

The trouble is, I don't know my trouble. Simply put, I am sad. Lately and for no clear reason, a bitter malaise has been lurking in my soul. I can smile and laugh when necessary, and I can still perform without betraying my audiences. But the old, reliable joy of my existence has been compromised, and that's why I have resorted to this specialist. This man.

He stares at me. Smiling, and smiling.

I am pretty in all the easy ways, and I'm poised enough to lend a primness to this moment. My clothes are casual and layered, the famous body kept hidden by the packaging. My famous hair is tied back in the least interesting of buns. I have shrunk my eyes and dulled their irises without truly distorting my appearance. My appearance is my life, and this is as homely as I can be. My life is appearance, and nothing about this place or these circumstances should arouse my guest.

Yet he is aroused.

Again, he leans back in his chair. What he wears inside his trousers is ridiculously large. What is it about men and their glands? Does he believe this will help me with my sad moods? Did I miss something in his endless explanation?

"How long?" I ask.

His eyes become round. "Excuse me?"

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"How long will your work take?" Then I remind him, "I have work today. And you said it will take some time."

"Twenty minutes," he guesses. "Or thirty, tops."

In my realm, that is a very long time.

"Sit and talk with me," he adds. "Really, that's all you need to do."

"I need to do that?" I ask.

Perhaps he can read my face. But more likely, he knows a thing or two about a woman's rejection. Either way, he decides to tell me, "I have to insist. Sit and talk to me. If I'm going to fix your soul, I need it nice and still."

I feel a thousand tiny fingers touching my mind.

"You have pepper errors," he confides. "And there've been some rather ugly mutations in your emotive centers."

"Which means...?"

He talks, and he talks. I hear volumes about Johnson reservoirs and sanity wells, and when I'm sure that nothing means anything real, he adds, "You have the most incredible set of passion algorithms. Did you know that?"

I start to say, "Thank you."

"Which I knew, of course. They've got to be." His projection grins and sits back in the chair, his simple trousers displaying his simple manhood. "I always figured. If I got the chance, I'd see what I'm seeing."

My instincts sound the alarm.

"*The Satin Pillow*," he says to me.

An early performance, and far from my best.

"*Make Me Love You*," he mentions.

A regrettable effort, that was.

"But *Passion and a Cake* is my favorite," he confesses. "I've watched it probably a thousand times."

I nod pleasantly but without pleasure, and with a matching voice, I say, "Tell me about yourself."

This is how you distract a man.

"Your work must be fascinating," I lie.

This is how you survive a man.

He says, "Oh, it's great work. The best, nearly."

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"How did you get started in it?" I inquire.

"The usual." A wide smirk tells me that I should know what is usual, what is ordinary. "When I was a kid, I played around with idiot machines."

"Idiot machines?"

"Computers," he explains. "When the AIs started arriving, I changed over. I could see the future. Computers had their day, but they've got more troubles than they've got talents."

I say nothing.

"AIs," he says again. "Self-aware, and wise, and each one different from all the others. That's the best thing about them, you know. Individuality. Even when they're built from the same precise hardware and the same proven memes, each is unique. Each changes as it lives its life. Which makes it a life. Not an existence. Not just a constellation of ideas inside a few quantum chips. There's a soul and a name and an individual way of looking at the universe."

Suddenly, I very nearly like this man.

Then he exclaims, "I love to play with them."

"'Play with them,'" I quote, using his own voice.

"Oh, to be helpful, of course. Like a doctor, or a psychiatrist." He nods, searching his resumé for a useful example. "My first job, for instance. There was trouble with the AI being used by an insurance company. Its purpose was predicting the future of each policyholder, but it wasn't doing any better than the idiot machines could. So what I did, I grafted more human elements onto its soul. I gave it a gender too. With those new tools, Clara could understand better how it is to be human. Flawed and frail and all that crap."

"Clara," I say.

"I gave her a projected face," he confides. "A movie star's face, with a matching body." Then his eyes drift away, betraying more history than he should share.

I say nothing.

Perhaps sensing my mood, he blurts, "I love AIs. Projected. Solid. And the hybrids, too." He gestures at me, smiling. Then he leans as close to me as he can while remaining in his seat. "I'm part AI myself," he boasts. "Have been for years."

Add-ons, he means.

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But he has a dozen names for what is one thing. And he has to tell me about each of the intricacies buried inside his reconfigured brain.

I listen, and I don't.

Then he finally stops describing his own glories, leaving me the brief opportunity to tell him, "That's nice. That you like us."

"Love you," he corrects. "All of you."

I say nothing.

"For instance," he says. Then he tries all over again to prove his love.

"I have a lot of modern friends," he boasts. "And some, you know, are quite a bit more than friends...!"

I stare at a point just above his grinning face.

He laughs. Giggles. "I always vote for citizenship," he tells me. "In every election, at least twenty times."

"Twenty?" I echo.

"Or more." He relishes making this confession. "My parents vote for you. And I've got uncles and aunts without a political neuron — "

"You urge them to vote for us?" I ask, with hopefulness.

"In a manner." He can't stop grinning. He can't pull his eyes off me, drinking in his pleasure. "And between you and me, I've got a dozen people who don't even exist until Election Day. They're my people. I coax them out of their graves to interface with polling booths around the country — "

"Out of their graves?"

"That's a joke. Corporeal, and dated." He brushes the attempted humor aside, adding, "My point is, really, that I've got a lot sympathy for your cause."

What is my cause? Like his aunts, I'm not a political creature, and this subject leaves me feeling uneasy. Inept.

All I can say is, "Thank you."

His smile hardens. With an overdone drama, he says, "The Common Sense Movement? Four years back?" He waits for a look of cold horror to pass across my face. But instead he sees only a quick comprehending nod. Am I suffering some kind of emotional block? "They're the idiots advocating IQ limits on machines and on humans, too."

"Of course I know about them," I say.

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"Political morons," he says.

I start to tell him, "Most of them, I think, are just scared — "

But he interrupts, blurting, "That splinter group. The Dismantlers? They killed twenty thousand of you with that EM blast."

Now the horror grabs hold. I shiver for a moment — an endearing human reflex sewn into my kick-ass — and with a genuinely weakened voice, I admit, "I knew some of the dead. I'd worked with — "

He names seven of them. Even augmented, his memory can't be that quick. He had their names waiting on his tongue, ready to impress me with his perfect knowledge of my career.

I shiver again, for many reasons.

"That trial was a joke," he assures me.

I agree, but I say nothing.

"Only the bombers themselves did time, and that was only on weapons charges and for vandalism." He wears his outrage on his face, but not his body. I know appearances. Better than any human, I can decipher the angle of a shoulder and the relaxed flexing of a single toe. He says again, "It was a joke," while a childish delight flows beneath his bright, staring eyes.

An obvious thought enters my mind.

"An injustice," he growls.

Controlling my own face, I conjure a sly smile and a narrow stare. "You know something," I observe.

He chortles. "Do I?"

"Something," I repeat, reading his eyes and hands and the bounce of the tongue inside his mouth. "What happened to the terrorists... afterward...would you happen to know anything about that...?"

The flirtatious wink returns. "Maybe," he gushes.

I say, "Prions."

"What about them?" he asks, smiling harder now.

"The word," I tell him. "'Prions.' It makes you happy."

"Maybe."

So I ask, "Why?" with a warm, open-faced smile.

"Maybe," he whispers. "Maybe I had a role in things. But I don't believe I should say anything more."

My nature and infinite practice come to play. I let my eyes grow to

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their natural intoxicating breadth, and my irises drink in the sight of him. One of my hidden layers of clothing dissolves. Then, a second layer. And while he gawks at the suddenly obvious contours of my famous body, I say, "Prions," once again.

"Someone was responsible," he admits.

As we sit together, the man is tinkering with my soul. Certain friends of mine regard him highly. At least, they love his smug expertise. And that's the only reason that I invited him here. I needed someone's help, and I thought I was desperate. Yet now, I feel sick and far more desperate than before. If the implication is true, or even if it is a lie, I am appalled to be in the company of such a creature. And with that realization, I reach out with a bare hand, mustering my charms and teasing his affections for me, saying to him, "Prions," one last time.

"The perfect revenge," he whispers. "Whoever's responsible, the means couldn't have been more perfect."

"Why?"

"Because it's fast-acting, and ruthless." He loves the topic. In his fantasies, he has dreamed of telling this to me. "Those idiot-people wanted you dismantled, and what they got instead was a monster dose of refined prions, and days later, their little minds were stolen away."

"I remember," I begin.

"Their ringleader," he says. "The first one hit with symptoms? She was giving that big speech in Paris, in front of half the world, and all at once she got confused...she looked up at the Eiffel Tower and asked, 'What is that?' And then she halfway stumbled, and turned, and everyone in the world could see the brown stain when she lost control of her rectum...!"

"Yes," I say. Nothing more.

He hears praise where nothing but an empty word is offered. He looks at my face and sees beauty and love wrapped around a soul to which he feels drawn. My most devoted fans are emotionally stunted. Love and trust are difficult at best, which is why they seem to treasure me.

"Are you finished?" I ask.

"Talking, you mean?"

"With me," I explain. "With my pepper errors, and such."

Then before he can reply, I add, "I'm feeling so much better now. It's just amazing."

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"I'm ninety percent done," he replies.

"It's enough," I exclaim. And then I remove another layer of clothing, nothing riding my perfect skin but a lacework of obedient photons. "Please. Let me show you how thankful I am for your help."

Some threshold has been bridged.

Quietly, with an unalloyed joy, he says, "Shit," and starts to shake from simple nervousness.

Normally the reaction would seem charming. On another day, I might touch him with a fond hand, or give him a kiss that would fuel his ego for weeks and months. But not today. I feel his countless fingers removing themselves from my deepest workings, one awful intimacy finished. And then with a quiet calm, I say, "Tell me the truth. Did you have any role whatsoever, small or large, in the prion revenge?"

"Sure," he whispers, nearly crying out of simple happiness.

I shake my head, saying, "Of course, the Dismantlers found new recruits after that, and they made fresh attacks...in retribution for the loss of their founders, naturally...."

A tiny nod.

"Which led to more acts of revenge," I continue.

Again, he whispers, "Sure."

"And you had a role — "

"Oh, yes!"

"Quiet," I caution. Setting a fingertip on his trembling lips, I say, "Quiet."

"You don't need to thank me," he says, plainly wanting thanks.

"The trouble is," I say.

"What?"

I withdraw my hand.

"What?" he mutters. "What's the trouble?"

"You're sick and amoral and wicked and ugly." I drop my camouflage, every pretense. I shake my head, and with a sharpened rage, I say, "It doesn't matter if you're telling the truth or not. I loathe you. I despise your beliefs, and I hate what you represent. I have half a mind to use every one of my talents...to lock you away in a cramped hole and make you suffer for your miserable failures...turn you into my slave and my little boy, and my plaything, and everything else demeaning...."

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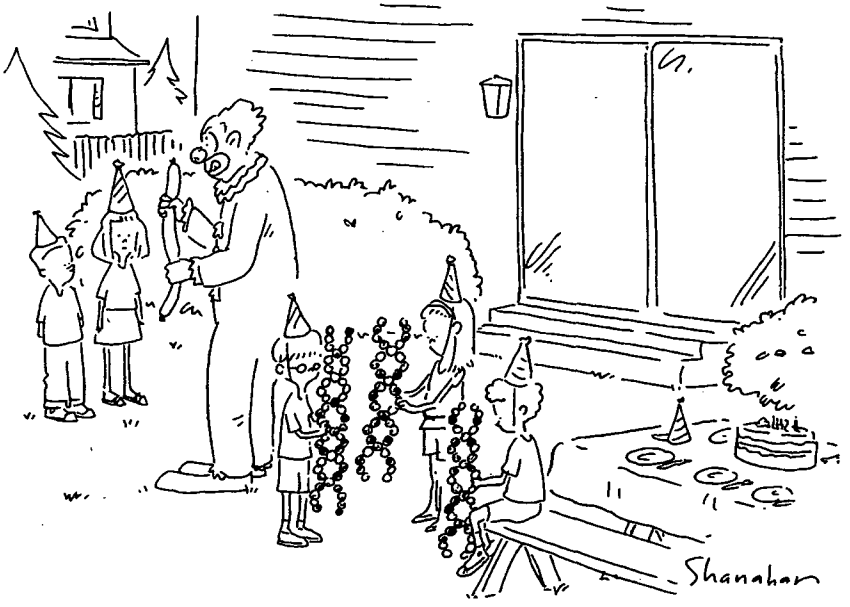
"Please," he begs.

"But here's the trouble," I say. "I'm thankful for what you've done. Without meaning to, you've shown me the source of my smothering sadness. The world's turning mad, and I'm doing nothing but ignoring it. Which is unacceptable and wrong."

The eyes are huge and lost, and the nod of the head is almost too slight to be seen. But then with a whimper, he starts to say, "You can't be angry about this.... God, I was helping your kind — "

"Which isn't the same as your kind," I tell him. "And I just hope your kick-ass can someday, in some little way, figure out what that means...."



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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Kiss of the Spider Critic

ONE SUNDAY, while reading the *Washington Post Book World*, I realized that for months now one particular byline had been missing from its pages: that of famous critic Cleverly Taint.

Upon realizing this, I began to cast backward through my recent memories of reading other literary journals. In no case could I recall newish reviews or essays by Taint. *The New York Review of Books*; the *Times Literary Supplement*; *New Republic*; the *Nation*; the *New York Times Book Review*; *Atlantic*; *Harpers* — All of Taint's usual venues had been barren of his idiosyncratic prose. No tapering off, no explanation: just a sudden drought.

This made me sad. I liked Taint's writing. He was acerbic and witty, erudite and perceptive. And he had been kind to me. A review he had authored of one of my early books had been instrumental in landing me my first agent. Although we had never met, I felt a link to him and his critical career.

I put down the *Post* and made a resolve. I would track down Taint and learn the cause of his silence. Perhaps he was sick or broke or otherwise down on his luck. There might be some way I could help him.

So the very next day I began phoning and e-mailing people in the business. Within a few hours, I had Taint's contact information. I dashed off a brief message online, explaining that I was a fan of his work, had noted the disappearance of his writing, and would be happy to meet with him to talk about the subject, on a strictly personal and confidential level.

The very next hour brought an electronic reply: *Good to hear from you. Let's have a drink. But nothing can possibly help my career now.*

A fellow New Yorker, Taint nominated a bar that proved to be midway between our apartments,

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and a time just hours away. Needless to say I was there well in advance, even more intrigued than I had been, thanks to the dour, hopeless tone of his message.

A dim vinyl booth in back held the critic, familiar to me from his many appearances on various PBS and cable-channel literary chat shows. Of course, off the screen and in his current condition, Taint looked more disreputable and slovenly than the usually dapper *homme de lettres* known to the viewing public. And, having beat me here, he had already started drinking.

I slipped into the booth, we shook hands, and I ordered a beer. After some inconsequential chitchat about mutual friends, enemies and acquaintances, I broached the crucial topic.

"Why the vast silence, Cleverly? Is it possible you've abandoned literature? Has your passion for explicating fiction guttered out?"

The red eyes of the littérateur grew misty. "Not at all. I still love the damn stuff."

"It must be censorship then. You've been blacklisted. But what could you have possibly done to get on the bad side of so many editors simultaneously?"

Taint glugged his martini and gestured to the waitress for another. "Are you kidding? I have editors calling me daily, begging me for anything — a blurb, a capsule review, even a 'books received' notice. But I dare not submit anything. Nor dare I explain why. And of course, that blanket refusal is indeed finally beginning to piss them off. Soon I *will* be blacklisted."

"I don't understand then. Those are the only possible explanations — No, wait, is it writer's block?"

Taint laughed and held up his hands. "Could these fluent fingers ever fail to dance across the keyboard? No, I'm not blocked. I am positively overflowing with opinions and aperçus, harsh flensings and bountiful encomiums. But I cannot commit any of them to print, for fear of the repercussions."

"Oh, come now, I don't buy that. You've always called them as you've seen them, never fearful or beholden to anyone. Besides, you're at the peak of your profession. Who could possibly harm you? Except yourself, of course, which is what I see you doing now."

"How about a witch?"

I was flabbergasted. "A witch?"

"Yes. One of those New Age Wiccans. Perhaps you recall my review some months ago of a certain 'novel' — if one can dishonor the beloved term — by one Luna

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Samhain. *Nothing Says Lovin' Like Something from the Coven.*"

"That stinker? You positively eviscerated it. And with what damning effect! One week it was on all the bestseller lists, and the next week it was on remainder tables across the nation."

Taint smiled wanly. "My final triumph. Would that I had never heard of that woman and her book!"

"Are you telling me she — she cursed you?"

"Yes. I received her malevolent letter shortly after the review ran. It arrived by messenger bat at midnight. In it she described what she had done to me. Every word of her curse was subsequently proven true. And what a curse! Simple blindness or paralysis would have been merciful. I could still dictate my reviews from inside an iron lung, like that Frenchman and his autobiography."

By now I was nearly dying with curiosity. "Tell me — what did she do to you?"

"Only this. Every book I inveigh against will succeed, and every book I praise will fail. Without exception."

I let out an involuntary gust of breath, as if I had been punched. "But, but — that's fiendish!"

Taint nodded sadly. "Isn't it though? I learned the full impact of it with the very next review of mine that followed the bestowal of the curse. Does the title *Titanium Skirts* mean anything to you?"

"Of course. The debut book of short stories by Esther Pribyl. Everyone predicted great things for it. After all, Pribyl had that unique point of view and publicity hook, being both a NASCAR driver and a top fashion model. But the book stiffed."

"Right after my extolling of it."

"But surely that's mere coincidence."

"Is it? Then how do you explain the success of, gack, *Howling Blood*, as soon as I sought to bury it?"

"That horror novel by the ten-year-old ex-fundamentalist preacher kid? Well, you know the tastes of the public...."

"Oh, don't try to convince me everything is just random synchronicity. I went through all these chains of reasoning myself at first, reluctant to believe in anything so foolish as a curse. But the misfirings continued to pile up. Then I began to experiment. I'd wait until the critical consensus was in on a book, and it was well on its way either up or down the charts. Then I'd weigh

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in. And the book would inevitably reverse its direction! There was no mistaking the cause and effect relationship."

Taint's doleful expression and grim certainty forced me to accept his conclusions. "But this is awful! If you render your true opinion, you bestow upon a book the exact opposite fate it deserves!"

"Correct. And what if I try to get around the curse by lavishing kisses on the stinkers and hurling brickbats at the exemplary books? Sure, the individual authors will benefit or suffer appropriately. But what about my reputation? I'll be seen as an idiot! All the virtue and respect I've accumulated will be as nought! My peers will call me a hack, a tout, a vulgarian, a Philistine! My name will rank with Rex Reed's and Walter Kirn's as a laughingstock!"

I thought furiously for fifteen minutes, but came up with no solution other than: "Couldn't you apologize to Samhain? Promise to praise all her books from here on, if she removes the curse?"

Taint erupted. "Never! That would leave me in exactly the same spot I'm in now! My good name allied on the side of crap. No, a brooding silence is my only recourse."

I pushed away from the table and slid out of the booth. "Well, Cleverly, I'm very sorry. If I have any more helpful ideas, I'll be sure to get in touch with you again."

I left him drowning his sorrows in liquor, fully expecting never to hear from the poor doomed bastard again.

Great was my surprise when Taint called me only three weeks later. His voice was filled with glee.

"I thought you'd like to know I've gotten a new job! I'm out of books now, and into television."

I confessed to bafflement. "Doing what?"

"I'm a producer with one of the networks. I called in a few chits — you remember when I gave a smashing review to that novel by the soap-opera actor, calling it a 'postmodern shattering of the intermedia barriers of self-reflexiveness' — and now I'm one of the people in charge of developing new shows. I'll be making scads more money than I ever could as a lowly critic."

"I assume the curse has been lifted then."

"Not at all!"

"But won't your endorsement as producer continue to damn the shows you admire and boost the ones you hate?"

"Exactly! But that's *just* what I

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need to happen. You see, every time I manage to get a literate, witty, experimental show on the air, just the kind I admire, it will earn immense praise from the critics but garner only low ratings typical of its kind and eventually fail. However, my star will shine brightly in the press as a daring executive willing to take risks for 'quality programming.' Here's one pitch I've already made. 'The High Art Tradition with Jonathan Franzen.' One hundred percent talking heads on a set that looks like every tenured English professor's living room."

I murmured approvingly.

"Now on the other hand, any commercial dreck I promote yet detest will of course soar in the ratings, earning my network millions, and making me the golden boy. I've got one such project greenlighted already. It stars Meryl Streep as a transgendered single parent, and it's called 'Ex-Why-Question Mark.'"

"Did she go from female to male or vice versa?"

"That's the beauty part! You never know! Sometimes she dresses butch, sometimes she's all Ru Paul. Her sex life is totally open-ended. Lots of hunky and babelicious guest stars, including Ellen Degeneres. The watercooler buzz will be enormous!"

I failed to repress a groan.

"No, don't look at it by your outmoded standards. This is a win-win situation!"

I tried objectively to see a flaw in Taint's reasoning, but failed.

"You don't suppose that other television producers share your curse, do you?"

"There's no supposition about it! I've already been initiated into their secret society! Would you like to join our screenwriters' auxiliary? We have staff witches who can make the necessary adjustments in your talents."

I thought about tossing off lefthandedly potboilers that hit the bestseller lists, and slaving over brilliant masterpieces that met endless rejection.

"No thanks, it's too much like what I'm already used to."

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Rick Bowes works in the Bobst Library at New York University and, like Don Webb, sometimes seems to approach omniscience in his knowledge of the obscure and the esoteric. In fact, of this story, he noted that the genesis of the Rex is in Macaulay's Lays of Ancient Rome *in which the statesman and poet writes about the shrine of Diana in a grove near Lake Nemi:*

Those trees in whose dim shadow
The ghastly priest doth reign,
The priest who slew the slayer
And shall himself be slain.

Some of Rick Bowes's short fiction has been collected in Transfigured Night and Other Stories. *This tale is one of his Time Rangers stories and readers might recognize some characters from "The Ferryman's Wife" (F&SF, May 2001) and elsewhere.*

The Mask of the Rex

By Richard Bowes

PRELUDE

THE LAST DAYS OF SUMMER have always been a sweet season on the Maine coast. There's still warmth in the sun, the cricket's song is mellow and the vacationers are mostly gone. Nowhere is that time more golden than on Mount Airey Island.

Late one afternoon in September of 1954, Julia Garde Macauley drove north through the white-shingled coastal towns. In the wake of a terrible loss, she felt abandoned by the gods and had made this journey to confront them.

Then, as she crossed Wenlock Sound Bridge which connects the island with the world, she had a vision. In a fast montage, a man, his face familiar yet changed, stood on crutches in a cottage doorway, plunged into an excited crowd of kids, spoke defiantly on the stairs of a plane.

The images flickered like a TV with a bad picture and Julia thought she saw her husband. When it was over, she realized who it had been. And understood even better the questions she had come to ask.

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The village of Penoquot Landing on Mount Airey was all carefully preserved clapboard and widow's walks. Few yachts were still in evidence. Fishing boats and lobster trawlers had full use of the wharves.

Baxter's Grande Hotel on Front Street was in hibernation until next summer. In Baxter's parlors and pavilions over the decades, the legends of this resort and Julia's own family had been woven.

Driving through the gathering dusk, Julia could almost hear drawling voices discussing her recent loss in the same way they did everything having to do with Mount Airey and the rest of the world.

"Great public commotion about that fly-boy she married."

"The day their wedding was announced marked the end of High Society."

"In a single-engine plane in bad weather. As if he never got over the war."

"Or knew he didn't belong where he was."

Robert Macauley, thirty-four years old, had been the junior Senator from New York for a little more than a year and a half.

Beyond the village, Julia turned onto the road her grandfather and Rockefeller had planned and built. "*Olympia Drive, where spectacular views of the mighty Atlantic and piney mainland compete for our attention with the palaces of the great,*" rhapsodized a writer of the prior century. "*Like a necklace of diamonds bestowed upon this island.*"

The mansions were largely shut until next year. Some hadn't been opened at all that summer. The Sears Estate had just been sold to the Carmelites as a home for retired nuns.

Where the road swept between the mountain and the sea, Julia turned onto a long driveway and stopped at the locked gates. Atop a rise stood Joyous Garde, all Doric columns and marble terraces. Built at the dawn of America's century, its hundred rooms overlooked the ocean, "*One of the crown jewels of Olympia Drive.*"

Joyous Garde had been closed and was, in any case, not planned for convenience or comfort. Julia was expected. She beeped and waited.

Welcoming lights were on in Old Cottage just inside the gates. Itself a substantial affair, the Cottage was built on a human scale. Henry and Martha Eder were the permanent caretakers of the estate and lived here year-round. Henry emerged with a ring of keys and nodded to Julia.

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Just then, she caught flickering images of this driveway and what looked at first like a hostile, milling mob.

A familiar voice intoned. "Beyond these wrought iron gates and granite pillars, the most famous private entryway in the United States, and possibly the world, the Macauley family and friends gather in moments of trial and tragedy."

Julia recognized the speaker as Walter Cronkite and realized that what she saw was the press waiting for a story.

Then the gates clanged open. The grainy vision was gone. As Julia rolled through, she glanced up at Mount Airey. It rose behind Joyous Garde covered with dark pines and bright foliage. Martha Eder came out to greet her and Julia found herself lulled by the old woman's Down East voice.

Julia had brought very little luggage. When it was stowed inside, she stood on the front porch of Old Cottage and felt she had come home. The place was wooden-shingled and hung with vines and honeysuckle. Her great-grandfather, George Lowell Stoneham, had built it seventy-five years before. It remained as a guest house and gate house and as an example of a fleeting New England simplicity.

ONE

George Lowell Stoneham was always referred to as one of the discoverers of Mount Airey. The Island, of course, had been found many times. By seals and gulls and migratory birds, by native hunters, by Hudson and Champlain and Scotch-Irish fishermen. But not until after the Civil War was it found by just the right people: wealthy and respectable Bostonians.

Gentlemen, such as the painter Brooks Carr looking for proper subjects, or the Harvard naturalist George Lowell Stoneham trying to lose memories of Antietam, came up the coast by steamer, stayed in the little hotels built for salesmen and schooner captains. They roamed north until they hit Mount Airey.

At first, a few took rooms above Baxter's General Provisions and Boarding House in Penoquot Landing. They painted, explored, captured bugs in specimen bottles. They told their friends, the nicely wealthy of Boston, about it. Brooks Carr rented a house in the village one summer and brought his young family.

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To Professor Stoneham went the honor of being the first of these founders to build on the island. In 1875, he bought (after hard bargaining) a chunk of land on the seaward side of Mount Airey and constructed a cabin in a grove of giant white pine that overlooked Mirror Lake.

In the following decades, others also built: plain cabins and studios at first, then cottages. In those days, men and boys swam naked and out of sight at Bachelors' Point on the north end of the island. The women, in sweeping summer hats and dresses that reached to the ground, stopped for tea and scones at Baxter's, which now offered a shady patio in fine weather. There they gossiped about the Saltonstall boy who had married the Pierce girl, then moved to France, and about George Stoneham's daughter Helen and a certain New York financier.

This fillet of land in this cream of a season did not long escape the notice of the truly wealthy. From New York they came, and Philadelphia. They acquired large chunks of property. The structures they caused to rise were still called studios and cottages. But they were mansions on substantial estates. By the 1890s those who could have been anywhere in the world chose to come in August to Mount Airey.

Trails and bridle paths were blazed through the forests and up the slopes of the mountain. In 1892 John D. Rockefeller and Simon Garde constructed a paved road, Olympia Drive, around the twenty-five-mile perimeter of the island.

Hiking parties into the hills, to the quiet glens at the heart of the island, always seemed to find themselves at Mirror Lake with its utterly smooth surface and unfathomable depths. The only work of man visible from the shore, and that just barely, was Stoneham Cabin atop a sheer granite cliff. Julia Garde Macauley didn't know what caused her great-grandfather to build on that exact spot. But she knew it wasn't whim or happenstance. The old tintypes showed a tall man with a beard like a wizard's and eyes that had gazed on Pickett's Charge.

Maybe the decision was like the one Professor Stoneham himself described in his magisterial *Wasps of the Eastern United States*: "In the magic silence of a summer's afternoon, the mud wasp builds her nest. Instinct, honed through the eons, guides her choice."

Perhaps, though, it was something more. A glimpse. A sign. Julia knew for certain that once drawn to the grove, George Stoneham had

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discovered that it contained one of the twelve portals to an ancient shrine. And that the priest, or the Rex as the priest was called, was an old soldier, Lucius, a Roman centurion who worshipped Lord Apollo.

Lucius had been captured and enslaved during Crassus's invasion of Parthia in the century before Christ. He escaped with the help of his god who then led him to one of the portals of the shrine. The reigning priest at that time was a devoted follower of Dionysius. Lucius found and killed the man, put on the silver mask and became Rex in his place.

Shortly after he built the cabin, George Lowell Stoneham built a cottage for his family at the foot of the mountain. But he spent much time up in the grove. After the death of his wife, he even stayed there, snowbound, for several winters, researching, he said, insect hibernation.

In warmer seasons, ladies in the comfortable new parlors at Baxter's Hotel alluded to the professor's loneliness. Conversation over brandy in the clubrooms of the recently built Bachelors' Point Aquaphiliacs Society dwelt on the "fog of war" that sometimes befell a hero.

There was some truth in all that. But what only Stoneham's daughter Helen knew was that beyond the locked door of the snowbound cabin, two old soldiers talked their days away in Latin. They sat on marble benches overlooking a cypress grove above a still lake in second-century Italy.

Lucius would look out into the summer haze, and come to attention each time a figure appeared, wondering, the professor knew, if this was the agent of his death.

Then on a morning one May, George Lowell Stoneham was discovered sitting in his cabin with a look of peace on his face. A shrapnel splinter, planted in a young soldier's arm during the Wilderness campaign thirty-five years before, had worked its way loose and found his heart.

Professor Stoneham's daughter and only child, Helen, inherited the Mount Airey property. Talk at the Thursday Cotillions in the splendid summer ballroom of Baxter's Grande Hotel had long spun around the daughter, "with old Stoneham's eyes and Simon Garde's millions."

For Helen was the first of the Boston girls to marry New York money. And such money and such a New York man! Garde's hands were on all the late nineteenth-century levers: steel, railroads, shipping. His origins were obscure. Not quite, a few hinted, Anglo Saxon. The euphemism used around the Aquaphiliacs Society was "Eastern."

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In the great age of buying and building on Mount Airey, none built better or on a grander scale than Mr. and Mrs. Garde. The old Stoneham property expanded, stretched down to the sea. The new "cottage," Joyous Garde, was sweeping, almost Mediterranean, with its Doric columns and marble terraces, its hundred windows that flamed in the rising sun.

With all this, Helen did not neglect Stoneham Cabin up on the mountain. Over the years, it became quite a rambling affair. The slope on which it was built, the pine grove in which it sat, made its size and shape hard to calculate.

In the earliest years of the century, after the birth of her son, George, it was remarked that Helen Stoneham Garde came up *long before* the season and stayed *well afterwards*. And that she was interested in things Chinese. Not the collections of vases and fans that so many clipper-captain ancestors had brought home, but earthenware jugs, wooden sandals, bows and arrows. And she studied the language. Not high Mandarin, apparently, but some guttural peasant dialect.

Relations with her husband were also a subject for discussion. They were rarely seen together. In 1906, the demented millionaire Harry Thaw shot the philandering architect Stanford White on the rooftop of Madison Square Garden in New York. And the men taking part in the Bachelors' Point Grand Regatta that year joked about how Simon Garde had been sitting two tables away. "As easily it might have been some other irate cuckold with a gun and Stanford White might be building our new yacht club right now."

At the 1912 Charity Ball for the Penoquot Landing Fisherfolk Relief Fund in Baxter's Grande Pavilion, the Gardes made a joint entrance. This was an event rare enough to upstage former President Teddy Roosevelt about to campaign as a Bull Moose.

Simon Garde, famously, mysteriously, died when the French liner *Marseilles* was sunk by a U-boat in 1916. Speculation flourished as to where he was bound and the nature of his mission. When his affairs, financial and otherwise, were untangled, his widow was said to be one of the wealthiest women in the nation.

A true child of New England, Helen Stoneham Garde never took her attention far from the money. Horses were her other interest besides chinoiserie. She bred them and raced them. And they won. Much of her

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time was spent on the Mount Airey estates. Stories of her reclusivity abounded.

The truth, her granddaughter Julia knew, would have stunned even the most avid of the gossips. For around the turn of the century, Lucius had been replaced. A single arrow in the eye had left the old Rex sprawling on the stone threshold of the shrine. His helmet, his sword, and the matched pair of Colt Naval Revolvers which had been a gift from George Stoneham lay scattered like toys.

A new Rex, or more accurately a Regina, picked the silver mask out of the dust and put it on. This was Ki Mien from north China, a servant of the goddess of forests and woods and a huntress of huge ability.

From a few allusions her grandmother dropped, Julia deduced that Helen Garde and the priestess had, over the next two decades, forged a union. Unknown to any mortal on the Island or in the world, they formed what was called in those days a Boston marriage.

In the years that Helen was occupied with Ki Mien, motorcars came to Mount Airey. Their staunchest supporter was George "Flash" Garde, Simon and Helen's son and only child. "A damned fine looking piece of American beef," as a visiting Englishman remarked.

Whether boy or man, Flash Garde could never drive fast enough. His custom-built Locomobile, all brass and polish and exhaust, was one of the hazards of Olympia Drive. "Racing to the next highball and low lady," it was said at Bachelors' Point. "Such a disappointment to his mother," they sighed at Baxter's.

In fact, his mother seemed unbothered. Perhaps this was because she had, quite early on, arranged his marriage to Cissy Custis, the brightest of the famous Custis sisters. The birth of her granddaughter Julia guaranteed the only succession that really mattered to her.

TWO

In 1954, on the evening of the last day of summer, Julia had supper in Old Cottage kitchen with the Eders. Mrs. Eder made the same comforting chicken pie she remembered.

The nursery up at Joyous Garde was vast. On its walls were murals of the cat playing the fiddle and the cow jumping the Moon. It contained a

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puppet theater and a playhouse big enough to walk around in if you were small enough. But some of Julia's strongest memories of Mount Airey centered on Old Cottage.

The most vivid of all began one high summer day in the early 1920s. Her grandmother, as she sometimes did, had taken Julia out of the care of her English nurse and her French governess.

When it was just the two of them, Helen Stoneham Garde raised her right hand and asked, "Do you swear on the head of Ruggles The One-Eared Rabbit not to tell anybody what we will see today?"

Time with her grandmother was always a great adventure. Julia held up the stuffed animal worn featureless with love and promised. Then they went for a walk.

Julia was in a pinafore and sandals and held Ruggles by his remaining ear. The woman of incalculable wealth wore sensible shoes and a plain skirt and carried a picnic basket. Their walk was a long one for somebody with short legs. But finches sang, fledglings chirped on oak branches. Invisible through the leaves, a woodpecker drilled a maple trunk. Red squirrels and jays spread news of their passage.

Up the side of Mount Airey Helen led her grandchild, to the silent white pine grove that overlooked deep, still waters. The Cabin itself was all odd angles, gray shingles and stone under a red roof. It was Julia's first visit to the place.

Years later, when she was able to calculate such things, she realized that the dimensions of Stoneham Cabin did not quite pan out. But only a very persistent visitor would note that something was missing, that one room always remained unexplored.

That first time, on a sunny porch visible from no angle outside the Cabin, Helen Garde set down the basket, unpacked wine and sandwiches along with milk and a pudding for Julia.

Then she stood behind her granddaughter and put her hands on the child's shoulders.

"Julia, I should like you to meet Alcier, whom we call the Rex."

The man in the doorway was big and square-built with dark skin and curly black hair. His voice was low, and, like Mademoiselle Martine, he spoke French, though his was different. He wore sandals and a white shirt and trousers. The priest bowed and said, "I am happy to meet the tiny lady."

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He was not frightening at all. On the contrary, morning doves fed out of his hand and he admired Ruggles very much. When they had finished lunch, the Rex asked her grandmother if he could show Julia what lay inside.

The two of them passed through a curtain which the child could feel but couldn't see. She found herself in a round room with doors open in all directions. It was more than a small child could encompass. That first time, she was aware only of a cave opening onto a snowy winter morning and an avenue of trees with the moon above them.

Then Alcier faced her across a fire which flickered in the center of the room even on this warm day. He put on a silver mask that covered his face, with openings for his eyes, nostrils and mouth, and said, *"Just as your grandmother welcomed me to her house, so, as servant of the gods, I welcome you to the Shrine of the Twelve Portals."*

But even as gods spoke through him, Julia could see that Alcier smiled and that his eyes were kind. So she wasn't a bit afraid.

When it was time to say good-bye, the Rex stood on the porch and bowed slightly. A red-tailed hawk came down and sat on his wrist. Because of Alcier's manners, Julia was never frightened of the Rex. Even later when she had seen him wiping his machete clean.

As a small child, Julia didn't know why her grandmother made her promise not to tell anyone about the hawk and the invisible curtain and the nice black man who lived up in the cabin. But she didn't.

Children who tell adults everything are trying to make them as wise as they. Just as children who ask questions already know why the sky is blue and where the lost kitten has gone. What they need is the confirmation that the odd and frightening magic which has turned adults into giants has not completely addled their brains. That Julia didn't need such reassurance she attributed to her grandmother and to Alcier.

On her next visit, she learned to call the place with the flame the Still Room. She found out that it was a shrine, a place of the gods, and that Alcier was a priest, though much different from the ones in the Episcopal church. On the second visit she noticed Alcier's slight limp.

Her grandmother never went inside with them. On Julia's next few visits over several summers, she and Alcier sat on stools in the Still Room and looked out through the twelve doors. The Rex patrolled each of these

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entrances every day. He had a wife and, over the years, several children whom Julia met. Though she never was told exactly where they lived.

Soon, she had learned the name of what lay beyond each portal: jungle, cypress grove, dark forest, tundra, desert, rock-bound island, marsh, river valley, mountain, cave, plains, sandy shore.

At first she was accompanied up the mountain by her grandmother. Then, in the summer she turned twelve, Julia was allowed to go by herself. By that time, she and Alcier had gone through each of the doors and explored what lay beyond.

The hour of the day, the climate, even, Julia came to realize, the continent varied beyond each portal. All but one, in those years, had a shrine of some kind. This might be a grove or a cave, or a rocky cavern, with a fire burning and, somewhere nearby, a body of water still as a mirror.

The plains, even then, had become a wasteland of slag heaps and railroad sidings. Julia did not remember ever having seen it otherwise.

If she loved Alcier, and she did, it was not because he spared her the truth in his quiet voice and French from the Green Antilles. Early on he showed her the fascinating scar on his left leg and explained that he was an escaped slave, "Like each Rex past and to be."

He told her how he had been brought over the wide waters when he was younger than she, how he had grown up on a plantation in the Sugar Islands. How he had been a house servant, how he had run away and been brought back in chains with his leg torn open.

Julia already knew how one Rex succeeded another. But on that first summer she visited the cabin alone, she and Alcier had a picnic on the wide, empty beach on the Indochina Sea and she finally asked how it had happened.

Before he answered, Alcier drew the silver mask out of the satchel he always carried. Julia noticed that he hardly had to guide it. The mask moved by itself to his face. Then he spoke.

Where I lived, we had a public name for the bringer of wisdom. And a private name known only by those to whom She spoke. When I was very young, She sent me dreams. But after I was taken beyond the sea, it was as if I was lost and She couldn't find me.

Then, after I had escaped and been recaptured and brought back to

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my owner, She appeared again and told me what to do. When I awoke, I followed Her command.

With the chains that bound my hands, I broke the neck of one who came to feed me. With that one's knife, I killed him who bore the keys. With the machete he dropped, I made the others flee. My left leg carried me well. My right was weak. I did not run as I once had.

In the forest, hunters chased me. But the goddess drew me into a mist and they passed by. Beside a stream, a hare came down to drink. I killed her and drank her blood. That morning, hunters went to my left and to my right. I slipped past them as before.

Then it was past midday. I stood in shadows on the edge of a glade. And all was silent and still. No leaf moved. In the sky directly above me, the sun and a hawk stood still. And I knew gods were at work here. I heard no sounds of hunters. For I was at the heart of the forest.

I saw the lodge made of wood and stone and I knew it was mine for the taking. If I killed the King of this place. I said a prayer to the goddess and let her guide me.

Not a leaf moved, not a bird sang. Then I saw the silver mask and knew the Rex was looking for me. My heart thumped. I commanded it to be still. The head turned one way then another. But slowly. The Rex was complacent, maybe, expecting to find and kill me easily. Or old and tired.

My goddess protected me. Made me invisible. Balanced on my good leg and my bad, I stood still as the Rex crossed the glade. I studied the wrinkled throat that hung below the mask. And knew I would have one chance. Just out of range of my knife, the priest hesitated for an instant. And I lunged. One great stride. I stumbled on my bad leg. But my arm carried true. The knife went into the throat. And I found it was a woman and that I was King in her place.

The shrine has existed as long as the gods. Along one of the paths someday will come the one who succeeds me, he told her. *When the gods wish, that one will do away with me.*

The Rex could speak of his own death the same way he might about a change of the seasons. But sometime after that, on a visit to the Still Room, Julia noticed derricks and steel tanks on the rocky island. When she asked Alcier about the destruction of another shrine, he seemed to wince, shook his head and said nothing.

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THREE

At night in Old Cottage, years later, Julia looked out the windows into the dark. And saw Mount Airey by daylight. The cabin and the grove were gone. The bare ground they had stood on was cracked and eroded. She told Mrs. Eder that she was going to visit Stoneham Cabin next morning.

Falling asleep, Julia remembered the resort as it had been. As a child, she had learned to swim at Bachelors' Point and heard the story of Mount Airey being spun. Men tamed and in trunks, women liberated in one-piece suits, swam together now and talked of the useful Mr. Coolidge and, later, the traitorous Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

When she was fifteen, her father died in an accident. Nothing but the kindest condolences were offered. But Julia, outside an open door, heard someone say, "Ironic, Flash Garde's being cut down by a speeding taxi."

"In front of the Stork Club, though, accompanied by a young lady described as a 'hostess.' He would have wanted it that way." She heard them all laugh.

By then, cocktail hour had replaced afternoon tea at Baxter's. In tennis whites, men sat with their legs crossed, women with their feet planted firmly on the ground. Scandal was no longer whispered. Julia knew that her mother's remarriage less than two months after her father's death would have been fully discussed. As would the decision of this mother she hardly ever saw to stay in Europe.

Julia's grandmother attended her son's funeral and shed not a tear. Her attitude was called stoic by some. Unfeeling by others. No one at Baxter's or Bachelors' Point had the slightest idea that the greatest love of Helen Garde's life had, over their twenty years together, given her hints of these events yet to come.

After her father's death and her mother's remarriage, Julia visited the Rex. From behind the silver mask, Alcier spoke. "*The gods find you well. You will wed happily with their blessings,*" he said. "*The divine ones will shield your children.*"

Much as she adored Alcier, Julia thought of this as fortuneteller stuff. She began, in the way of the young, to consider the Rex and the Shrine of the Twelve Portals as being among the toys of childhood.

That fall, she went to Radcliffe as her grandmother wished. There, the

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thousand and one things of a wealthy young woman's life drove thoughts of the gods to the back of her mind. They didn't even reemerge on a sunny day on Brattle Street in her senior year.

Julia and her friend Grace Shipton were headed for tennis lessons. At the curb, a young man helped a co-ed from Vassar into the seat of an MG Midget. He looked up and smiled what would become a well-known smile. And looked again, surprised. It was the first time he had laid eyes on the woman he would marry.

Before this moment, Julia had experienced a girl's tender thoughts and serious flirtations. Then her eyes met those of the young man in the camel hair jacket. She didn't notice the boy who watched them, so she didn't see his mischievous smile or feel the arrow. But in a moment of radiance her heart was riven.

When Julia asked Grace who the young man was, something in her voice made the Shipton heiress look at her. "That's Robert Macauley," came the answer. "The son of that lace curtain thug who's governor of New York."

Julia Garde and the young Macauley were locked in each other's hearts. All that afternoon she could think of nothing else. Then came the telegram that read, "Sorry to intrude. But I can't live without you."

"Until this happened, I never believed in this," she told him the next afternoon when they were alone and wrapped in each others' arms.

Robert proposed a few days later. "The neighbors will burn shamrocks on your front lawn," he said when Julia accepted.

She laughed, but knew that might be true. And didn't care.

Polite society studied Helen Stoneham Garde's face for the anger and outrage she must feel. The heiress to her fortune had met and proposed to marry an Irishman, *a Catholic, A DEMOCRAT!*

But when Julia approached her grandmother in the study at Joyous Garde and broke the news, Helen betrayed nothing. Her eyes were as blue as the wide Atlantic that lay beyond the French doors. And as unknowable.

"You will make a fine-looking couple," she said. "And you will be very happy."

"You knew."

"Indirectly. You will come to understand. The wedding should be

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small and private. Making it more public would serve no immediate purpose."

"Best political instincts I've encountered in a Republican," the governor of the Empire State remarked on hearing this. "Be seen at Mass," he told his son. "Raise the children in the Church. With the Garde money behind you, there'll be no need to muck about with concrete contracts."

"There will be a war and he will be a fighter pilot," Helen told Julia after she had met Robert. Before her granddaughter could ask how she knew, she said impatiently, "All but the fools know a war is coming. And young men who drive sports cars always become pilots."

It was as she said. Robert was in Naval Flight Training at Pensacola a month after Pearl Harbor. The couple's song was, "They Can't Take that Away from Me."

Their son Timothy was not three and their daughter Helen was just born when Robert Macauley sailed from San Francisco on the aircraft carrier *Constellation*. Julia saw him off, then found herself part of the great, shifting mass of soldiers and sailors home on leave, women returning after saying good-bye to husbands, sons, boyfriends.

On a crowded train, with sailors sleeping in the luggage racks, she and a Filipino nurse cried about their men in the South Pacific. She talked with a woman, barely forty, who had four sons in the army.

Julia felt lost and empty. She reread *The Metamorphoses* and *The Odyssey* and thought a lot about Alcier and the Still Room. It had been two years since she had visited Mount Airey. She felt herself drawn there all that winter.

Early in spring, she left her children in the care of nurses and her grandmother and went by train from New York to Boston and from Boston to Bangor. She arrived in the morning and Mr. Eder met her at the station. They drove past houses with victory gardens and V's in the windows if family members were in the service.

A sentry post had been established on the mainland end of Wenlock Sound Bridge. The Army Signal Corps had taken over Bachelors' Point for the duration of the war.

The bar at Baxter's was an officers' club. On Olympia Drive, some of the great houses had been taken for the duration. Staff cars, jeeps, canvas-topped trucks stood in the circular drives.

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It was just after the thaw. Joyous Garde stood empty. Patches of snow survived on shady corners of the terraces. The statues looked as if they still regretted their lack of clothes.

Julia found a pair of rubber boots that fit and set off immediately for Stoneham Cabin. In summer, Mount Airey was nature in harness, all bicycle paths and hiking parties. In Mud Time, dry beds ran with icy water, flights of birds decorated a gray sky, lake-sized puddles had appeared, the slopes lay leafless and open.

Julia saw the stranger as she approached the cabin. But this was her land and she did not hesitate. Sallow-faced, clean-shaven with the shadow of a beard, he was expecting her. When she stepped onto the porch, he came to attention. She knew that sometime in the recent past he had murdered Alcier.

"Corporal John Smalley, Her Britannic Majesty's London Fusiliers," he said. "Anxious to serve you, my lady."

In the Still Room, when they entered, Julia looked around, saw wreckage in the desert shrine, smashed tanks on the sand. Dead animals lay around the oasis and she guessed the water was poisoned.

The murderer put on the silver mask and spoke. His voice rang. Julia felt a chill.

"It's by the will of the gods that I'm here today. By way of a nasty scrap in the hills. Caught dead to rights and every one of us to die. Officers down. No great moment. But the sergeant major was gone. A spent round richoted off my Worsley helmet and I was on me back looking up.

I lay still but I could hear screams and thought it was up and done with and I would dance on hot coals for as long as it took. For cheating and philandering and the cove I stabbed in Cheapside. And I prayed as I'd never done.

Then He appeared. Old Jehovah as I thought, all fiery eyes and smoke behind his head. Then He spoke and it seems it was Mars himself. I noticed he wore a helmet and carried a flaming sword. He told me I was under His protection and nothing would happen to me.

Good as His word. No one saw when I rose up and took my Enfield. He led the way all through the night, talking in my ear. About the shrine and the priest that lives here.

A runaway slave it always is who kills the old priest and takes over.

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And I choked at that. Not the killing, But Britains never will be slaves and all.

Lord Mars told me enlistment in Her Majesty's Army came close enough. New thinking, new blood was what was needed. Led me to a hill shrine before dawn. Left me to my own devices.

The shrine's that one through that portal behind your ladyship. A grove with the trees all cut short by the wind and a circle of stone and a deep pool. When I was past the circle and beside the pool, the wind's sound was cut off and it was dead still.

A path led down to the pool and on it was a couple of stones and a twig resting on them. And I knew not to disturb that. So I went to ground. Oiled my Enfield. Waited. Took a day or two. But I was patient. Ate my iron rations and drank water from the pool.

When he came, it was at dusk and he knew something was up. A formidable old bugger he was. But....

He trailed off. Removed the mask. "You knew him. Since you were a little girl, I hear."

Julia's eyes burned. "He had a wife and children."

"I've kept them safe. He'd put a sum aside for them from shrine offerings and I saw they had that. Got my own bit of bother and strife tucked away. We know in this job we aren't the first. And won't be the last. Living on a loan of time so to speak."

He pointed to the ruined shrines. "The gods have gotten wise that things will not always go their way."

The corporal told her about defense works and traps he was building. Like a tenant telling the landlady about improvements he is making, thought Julia. She knew that was the way it would be between them and that she would always miss her noble Alcier.

Just before she left, Smalley asked, "I wonder if I could see your son, m'lady. Sometime when it's convenient."

Julia said nothing. She visited her grandmother, eighty and erect, living in Taos in a spare and beautiful house. Her companion was a woman from the Pueblo, small, silent and observant.

"Timothy is the whole point of our involvement," said the old woman. She sat at a table covered with breeding charts and photos of colts. "You and I are the precursors."

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"He's just a child."

"As were you when you were taken to the shrine. Think of how you loved Alcier. He would have wanted you to do this. And you shall have your rewards. Just as I have."

"And they are?"

"At this point in your life, you would despise them if I told you. In time, they will seem more than sufficient."

Julia knew that she would do as the Rex had asked. But that summer Robert was stationed in Hawaii. So she went out to be with him instead of going to Mount Airey. The next August, she gave birth to Cecilia, her second daughter.

The year after that, Robert was in a naval hospital in California, injured in a crash landing on a carrier flight deck. His shoulder was smashed but healed nicely. A three-inch gash ran from his left ear to his jaw. It threw his smile slightly off-kilter.

He seemed distant, even in bed. Tempered like a knife. And daring. As if he too sensed death and destiny and the will of the gods.

When the war was over Robert had a Navy Cross, a trademark smile, and a scar worth, as he put it, "Fifty thousand votes while they still remember."

Over his own father's objections, the young Macauley ran for Congress from the West Side of Manhattan. The incumbent, one of the old man's allies, was enmeshed in a corruption scandal. Robert won the primary and the election. His lovely wife and three young children were features of his campaign.

Julia paid a couple of fast visits to the cabin. On one of them the Corporal told her, "I know it's a kid will be my undoing. But it will be a little girl." On another he said, "The gods would take it as a great favor if you let me speak to your son."

Thus it was that one lovely morning the following summer, Julia left her two little daughters in the huge nursery at Joyous Garde and brought Timothy to Stoneham Cabin. As if it were part of a ritual, she had Mrs. Eder pack lunch. Julia stuck a carton of the Luckies she knew the Corporal favored into the basket and started up the hill. Her son, age seven and startlingly like the father he rarely saw, darted around, firing a toy gun at imaginary enemies.

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The corporal, tanned and wiry, sat on the back porch, smoking and cleaning his rifle. Tim stared at him, wide-eyed. "Are you a commando?" he asked after the introductions were made and he'd learned that their guest was English.

"Them's Navy," Smalley said. "And I'm a soldier of the Queen. Or King as it is."

Julia stared down at Mirror Lake. Except when Smalley spoke, she could imagine that Alcier was still there. Something even more intense than this must have happened to her grandmother after the death of Ki Mien.

"Have you killed anybody?"

"Killing's never a nice thing, lad. Sometimes a necessity. But never nice," Smalley said. "Now what do you say that we ask your mother if I can show you around?"

Later, on their way back to the cottage, Timothy was awestruck. "He showed me traps he had set! In a jungle! He told me I was going to be a great leader!"

As her grandmother had with her, Julia demanded his silence. Timothy agreed and kept his word. In fact, he rarely mentioned the cabin and the shrine. Julia wondered if Smalley had warned him not to. Then and later, she was struck by how easily her son accepted being the chosen of the gods.

Fashion had passed Mount Airey by. That summer, the aging bucks at Bachelors' Point drawled on about how Dewey was about to thrash Truman. And how the Rockefellers had donated their estate to the National Parks Service.

"What else now that the Irish have gotten onto the island?"

"And not even through the back door."

That summer, Helen Stoneham Garde stayed in New Mexico. But Joyous Garde jumped. "Prominent Democrats from the four corners of the nation come to be bedazzled," as Congressman Macauley murmured to his wife.

Labor leaders smoked cigars in the oak and leather splendor of Simon Garde's study. Glowing young Prairie Populists drank with entrenched Carolina Dixiecrats. The talk swirled around money and influence, around next year's national elections and Joe Kennedy's boy down in Massachusetts.

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Above them, young Macauley with his lovely wife stood on the curve of the pink and marble stairs. Julia had grown interested in this game. It reminded her of her grandmother's breeding charts and racehorses.

The following summer, Helen Stoneham Garde returned to her estate. Afternoons at Baxter's were drowsy now and dowager-ridden.

"Carried in a litter like royalty."

"Up the mountain to the cabin."

"Returned there to die it seems."

"Her granddaughter and grandson-in-law will have everything." Shudders ran around the room.

On an afternoon of warm August sun and a gentle sea breeze, Julia sat opposite her grandmother on the back porch of Stoneham Cabin. "Only the rich can keep fragments of the past alive," Helen told her. "To the uneducated eye, great wealth can be mistaken for magic."

Below them, a party had picnicked next to Mirror Lake a bit earlier. Hikers had passed though. But at the moment, the shore was deserted, the surface undisturbed. The Rex was not in evidence.

Helen's eye remained penetrating, her speech clear. "A peaceful death," she said, "is one of the gifts of the gods."

Julia wished she had thought to ask her grandmother more questions about how their lives had been altered by the shrine. She realized that her own introduction to it at so young an age had occurred because Helen could not stand dealing with the man who had murdered the one closest to her.

The two sat in a long silence. Then the old woman said, "My dearest child, I thought these might be of interest," and indicated a leather folder on the table.

Julia opened it and found several photos. She stared, amazed at the tree-lined Cambridge Street and the young couple agape at their first glimpse of each other. She couldn't take in all the details at once: the deliveryman hopping from his cart, the elderly gent out for a stroll, the boy who walked slightly behind what must have been his parents. Small, perhaps foreign in his sandals, he alone saw the tall, dark-haired young man, the tall blond young woman, stare at each other in wonder.

"You knew before...," Julia said, looking up. She didn't dare breathe. Her grandmother still smiled slightly. Her eyes were wide. Beside her

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stood a figure in a silver mask. Tall and graceful. Not Corporal Smalley. Not at all. He wore only a winged helmet and sandals. Hermes, Lord Mercury, touched Helen with the silver caduceus staff he carried.

Julia caught her breath. Her grandmother slumped slightly. Helen Stoneham Garde's eyes were blank. Her life was over. The figure was gone.

FOUR

"First day of Autumn," Martha Eder said when Julia came down the Old Cottage stairs the morning after her return. A picnic basket had been packed. Julia had not brought cigarettes for Smalley, had reason to think they weren't necessary.

The air was crisp but the sun was warm enough that all Julia needed was a light jacket. As she set out, Henry Eder interrupted his repair of a window frame. "I can go with you, see if anything needs doing." When she declined, he nodded and went back to his work.

Grief was a private matter to Mainers. Besides, even after three quarters of a century, Julia's family were still "summer folk" and thus unfathomable.

The walk up Mount Airey was magnificent. Julia had rarely seen it this late in the year. Red and gold leaves framed green pine. Activity in the trees and undergrowth was almost frantic. A fox, intent on the hunt, crossed her path.

After her grandmother's death, she had returned to the cabin only on the occasions when she brought Tim. In the last few years, she hadn't been back at all.

She remembered a day when she and Robert sat in the study of their Georgetown mansion and Timothy knocked on the door. Just shy of twelve, he wore his Saint Anthony's Priory uniform of blazer and short pants. In 1951, the American upper class kept its boys in shorts for as long as possible. A subtle means of segregating them from the masses.

Representative Robert Macauley (D-NY) was maneuvering for a Senate nomination in what promised to be a tough year for Democrats. He looked up from the speech he was reviewing. Julia, busy with a guest list, watched them both.

Timothy said, "What I would like for my birthday this year is a

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crewcut. Lots of the kids have them. And I want long pants when I'm not in this stupid monkey suit. And this summer I want to be allowed to go up to the cabin on Mount Airey by myself."

Julia caught the amusement and look of calculation in her husband's eyes. Did his kid in short pants gain him more votes from women who thought it was adorable than he lost from men who thought it was snooty?

"In matters like this, we defer to the upper chamber," he said with a quick, lopsided smile and nodded to Julia.

She felt all the pangs of a mother whose child is growing up. But she negotiated briskly. The first demand was a throwaway as she and her son both knew.

"No crewcut. None of the boys at your school have them. The brothers don't approve." The brothers made her Protestant skin crawl. But they were most useful at times like this.

"Long pants outside school? Please!" he asked. "Billy Chervot and his brothers all get to wear blue jeans!" Next year would be Timothy's last with the brothers. Then he'd be at Choate and out in the world.

"Perhaps. For informal occasions."

"Jeans!"

"We shall see." He would be wearing them, she knew, obviously beloved, worn ones. On a drizzly morning in Maine. His hair would be short. He'd have spent that summer in a crewcut.

Julia had studied every detail of a certain photo. She estimated Tim's age at around fifteen. The shot showed him as he approached Stoneham Cabin. He wore his father's old naval flight jacket, still too big for him, though he had already gotten tall.

"Mount Airey?" the eleven-year-old Tim asked.

She heard herself saying. "Yes. That should be fine. Check in with Mrs. Eder when you're going. And tell her when you come back. Be sure to let me know if anything up there needs to be done."

Her son left the room smiling. "What's the big deal about that damned cabin?" her husband asked.

Julia shrugged. "The Wasps of the Eastern United States," she said and they both laughed. The title of her grandfather's tome was a joke between them. It referred to things no outsider could ever understand or would want to.

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Julia returned to her list. She had memorized every detail of the photo of their son. He had tears in his eyes. The sight made her afraid for them all.

Her husband held out a page of notes. "Take a look. I'm extending an olive branch to Mrs. Roosevelt. Her husband and my dad disagreed." He grinned. Franklin Roosevelt, patrician reformer and Timothy Macauley, machine politician, had famously loathed each other.

Julia stared at her husband's handwriting. Whatever the words said would work. The third photo in the leather folder her grandmother had given her showed FDR's widow on a platform with Robert. Julia recognized a victory night.

She could trace a kind of tale with the photos. She met her husband. He triumphed. Their son went for comfort to the Rex. A story was told. Or, as in *The Iliad*, part of one.

That day in the study in Georgetown, she looked at Robert Macauley, in the reading glasses he never wore publicly, and felt overwhelming tenderness. Julia could call up every detail of the photo of their meeting.

Only the boy in the background looked directly at the couple who stared into each other's eyes. He smiled. His hand was raised. Something gold caught the sun. A ring? A tiny bow? Had Robert and she been hit with Eros's arrow? All she knew was that the love she felt was very real.

How clever they were, the gods, to give mortals just enough of a glimpse of their workings to fascinate. But never to let them know everything.

That summer, her son went up Mount Airey alone. It bothered Julia as one more sign he was passing out of her control. "The gods won't want to lose this one, m'lady," Smalley had told her.

Over the next few years, Timothy entered puberty, went away to school, had secrets. His distance increased. When the family spent time at Joyous Garde, Tim would go to the cabin often and report to her in privacy. Mundane matters like "Smalley says the back eaves need to be reshingled." Or vast, disturbing ones like, "That jungle portal is unpassable now. Smalley says soon ours will be the only one left."

Then came a lovely day in late August 1954. Sun streamed through the windows of Joyous Garde, sailboats bounced on the water. In the ballroom, staff moved furniture. A distant phone rang. A reception was to

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be held that evening. Senator Macauley would be flying in from Buffalo that afternoon.

Julia's secretary, her face frozen and wide-eyed, held out a telephone and couldn't speak. Against all advice, trusting in the good fortune which had carried him so far, her husband had taken off in the face of a sudden Great Lakes storm. Thunder, lightning, and hail had swept the region. Radio contact with Robert Macauley's one-engine plane had been lost.

The crash site wasn't found until late that night. The death wasn't confirmed until the next morning. When Julia looked for him, Timothy was gone. The day was cloudy with a chill drizzle. She stood on the porch of Old Cottage a bit later when he returned. His eyes red. Dressed as he was in the photo.

As they fell into each others' arms, Julia caught a glimpse that was gone in an instant. Her son, as in the photo she had studied so often, approached Stoneham Cabin. This time, she saw his grief turn to surprise and a look of stunned betrayal. Timothy didn't notice.

The two hugged and sobbed in private sorrow before they turned toward Joyous Garde and the round of public mourning. As they did, he said, "You go up there from now on. I never want to go back."

FINALE

Julia approached the grove and cabin on that first morning of Fall. She was aware that it lay within her power to destroy this place. Julia had left a sealed letter to be shown to Timothy if she failed to return. Though she knew that was most unlikely to happen.

A young woman, casual in slacks and a blouse, stood on the porch. In one hand she held the silver mask. "I'm Linda Martin," she said. "Here by the will of the gods."

Julia recognized Linda as contemporary and smart. "An escaped slave?" she asked.

"In a modern sense, perhaps." The other woman shrugged and smiled. "A slave of circumstances."

"I've had what seem to be visions." Julia said as she stepped onto the porch. "About my son and about this property."

"Those are my daughter's doing, I'm afraid. Sally is nine," Linda was

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apologetic yet proud. "I've asked her not to. They aren't prophecy. More like possibility."

"They felt like a promise. And a threat."

"Please forgive her. She has a major crush on your son. Knows everything he has done. Or might ever do. He was very disappointed last month when he was in pain and wanted to talk to the corporal. And found us."

"Please forgive Tim. One's first Rex makes a lasting impression." Julia was surprised at how much she sounded like her grandmother.

The living room of Stoneham Cabin still smelled of pine. The scent reminded Julia of Alcier and her first visit. As before, a door opened where no door had been. She and Linda passed through an invisible veil and the light from the twelve portals mingled and blended in the Still Room.

"Sally, this is Julia Garde Macauley. Timothy's mother."

The child who sat beyond the flame was beautiful. She wore a blue tunic adorned with a silver boy riding a dolphin. She bowed slightly. "Hello, Mrs. Macauley. Please explain to Timothy that the Corporal knew what happened was Fate and not me."

Julia remembered Smalley saying, "It's a child will be my undoing." She smiled and nodded.

Linda held out the mask which found its way to Sally's face.

"This is something I dreamed about your son."

What Julia saw was outdoors and in winter. It was men mostly. White mostly. Solemn. Formally dressed. A funeral? No. A man in judicial robes held a book. He was older, but Julia recognized an ally of her husband's, a young Congressman from Oregon. This was the future.

"A future," said the voice from behind the mask. Julia froze. The child was uncanny.

Another man, seen from behind, had his hand raised as he took the oath of office. An inauguration. Even with his back turned, she knew her son.

"And I've seen this. Like a nightmare." Flames rose. The cabin and the grove burned.

"I don't want that. This is our home." She was a child and afraid.

Later, Linda and Julia sat across a table on the rear porch and sipped wine. The foliage below made Mirror Lake appear to be ringed with fire.

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"It seems that the gods stood aside and let my husband die. Now they want Tim."

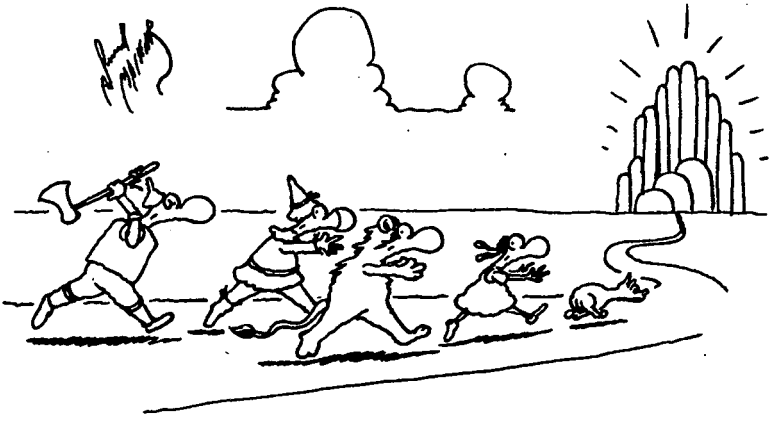
"Even the gods can't escape Destiny," Linda said. "They struggle to change it by degrees."

She looked deep into her glass. "I have Sally half the year. At the cusps of the four seasons. The rest of the time she is with the Great Mother. Once her abilities were understood, that was as good an arrangement as I could manage. Each time she's changed a little more."

Another mother who must share her child, Julia thought. We have much to talk about. How well the Immortals know how to bind us to their plans. She would always resent that. But she was too deeply involved not to comply. Foreknowledge was an addiction.

A voice sang, clear as mountain air. At first Julia thought the words were in English and that the song came from indoors. Then she realized the language was ancient Greek and that she heard it inside her head.

The song was about Persephone, carried off to the Underworld, about Ganymede abducted by Zeus. The voice had an impossible purity. Hypnotic, heartbreaking, it sang about Time flowing like a stream and children taken by the gods.



Yellow brick road rage.

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SCIENCE

PAT MURPHY & PAUL DOHERTY

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

AS WE WRITE this, Pat is just back from a trip to Las Vegas. The action at the craps tables reminded her of Fritz Leiber's Nebula-Award-winning story, "Gonna Roll the Bones," in which Joe Slattermill rolls dice with Death. Playing the slots called to mind Harlan Ellison's "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes," in which a down-and-out gambler wins a fortune with the aid of a woman whose soul is trapped in a slot machine. And Pat's knowledge of probability led her to contemplate the biggest fantasy of all — the fantasy that you can win in Vegas.

Examining that last fantasy brings us to this column and an analysis of probability, an area of math that most people don't really understand. Calculating probability can be tough. To calculate the odds that something will happen, you have to count the ways that something can happen and then count the ways it cannot happen. And as Paul is fond of saying, counting is difficult.

"Wait a minute," you say. "Back in first grade, counting was easy. There were five apples, two oranges. Nothing to it." Yet when you get around to reading *The House at Pooh Corner*, you discover otherwise. Christopher Robin and Pooh visit "an enchanted place at the very top of the Forest called Galleons Lap, which is sixty-something trees in a circle; and Christopher Robin knew that it was enchanted because nobody had ever been able to count whether it was sixty-three or sixty-four, not even when he tied a piece of string round each tree after he had counted it." (You see, to count the trees you have to keep track of large numbers and figure out which ones are trees and which ones are bushes...and that's hard.)

In this column, we'll tell you a bit about probability and tell you the best strategy for winning on

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"Let's Make a Deal." We'll show you how to calculate the probability of certain events and explain why we don't play the California Lottery — even when the jackpot is $40 million.

Pick a Door — Any Door

We'll start our discussion of probability and gambling with an intriguing question that mathematicians have dubbed the Monty Hall problem. It's named after the host of the popular game show "Let's Make a Deal" and is based on an idealized version of a moment in that show.

Let's say you're a contestant on this version of "Let's Make a Deal." You dressed up in a costume that was sufficiently goofy to get Monty to pick you from the other lunatics in the audience. You trade Monty whatever it is you brought to trade — a swizzle stick in the shape of a hula girl, let's say — and he offers you a choice of three doors. There's something great — let's say a trip to Hawaii — behind one of the doors.

With much prompting from the audience, you choose Door Number One. In this version of the show, Monty always opens one of the doors that you didn't pick, and it never has the big prize.

So let's say Monty opens Door Number Three, revealing five thousand rolls of toilet paper. At this point, Monty asks you if you want to change your choice: do you want to stay with Door Number One or switch to Door Number Two?

Visions of luaus dance in your head and you freeze. What should you do? Should you switch or would you be better off staying with your original choice? Or does it matter? Are the odds the same either way?

For those who know probability, the best choice is very clear. But most people don't see it that way. While we talk about probability, think about your choice of doors and whether or not you want to switch.

Heads, You Win

Probability is a way to measure how likely something is to happen. When you flip an ordinary coin, you have an equal chance of getting heads or getting tails.

If you flipped a coin one hundred times, it's likely that you'd get about as many heads as you'd get tails. But probability doesn't guarantee equal numbers of heads and tails. Probability doesn't tell you what will happen. It just tells you how likely something is to happen.

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You win a coin toss by correctly calling whether heads or tails will face upward when the coin comes to rest. You figure out the probability that you will win by counting both the total number of possible outcomes and the number of those outcomes in which you win. In this case, there are two possible outcomes: heads and tails. One of those outcomes means you win. So the probability that you will win is 1 out of 2 — which you can write as 1/2.

Looks like a fraction, doesn't it? It is. Probability is a number from 0 to 1 that measures the likelihood that an event will occur. A probability of 0 means that an event will never happen. A probability of 1 means that the event will certainly happen. (Pat says there's a probability of 1 that the sun will rise tomorrow. Being a stickler, Paul says that the probability of sunrise is very close to 1. Just because it has risen a trillion times in a row doesn't absolutely guarantee it will happen again.)

A probability of 1/2 says that you are likely to get heads half the time that you flip a coin. People also sometimes say that the probability of getting heads is fifty-fifty. The fraction, 1/2, can be converted into a decimal number. Divide 2 into 1 and you get .5. Convert this to a percentage by multiplying by 100. You get 50 percent. Heads will turn up 50 percent of the time, which is why people say the chances are fifty-fifty.

The probability of getting heads on any coin toss is 1/2 — even if you've tossed the coin ten times and it has come up heads every time. You still have a fifty-fifty chance of getting heads on the eleventh toss. Each coin toss is independent of all the others.

In their heart of hearts, most people don't believe this. In "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes," the casino owner (a man you would expect to understand probability quite well) says, "But no one can win thirty-eight thousand dollars on nineteen straight jackpots off one slot machine; *it's an impossibility*."

That's not quite so. Such a winning streak may be unlikely, but it's not impossible.

When Paul is speaking about probability to a large group, he has everyone stand up, take out a coin, and start flipping it. If a person's coin comes up tails, that person sits down. If it comes up heads, the person keeps flipping. Half of the audience sits down after one flip, half of the remaining half sits down after two flips. If he started with

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500 people, he stops them after six flips. At that point, he has about eight people still standing. Each of them is holding a coin that has come up heads six times in a row.

What will happen when these people flip their coins one more time? Will they all get tails because those coins are "due" for a tail? Will they all get heads because they are "on a roll"? The answer, of course, is somewhere between the two extremes. Most likely four people will get heads and four will get tails. But that isn't guaranteed. After all, this is about probability, not certainty.

Roll the Bones

A flip of a coin has two possible outcomes: heads or tails. A roll of a pair of dice opens up a bigger world of possibilities.

A single die is a cube with six sides and a number from one to six on each side. Assuming the dice aren't loaded, each number has an equal chance of coming up. The probability of getting any number is one out of six or 1/6.

Now suppose you roll two dice. With two dice, you can roll numbers from two to twelve.

Here's something to think about. With one die, you were just as likely to roll a 2 as you were to roll a 5. Now that you are rolling two dice, are you just as likely to roll so that the sum of the die is 2 as you are to roll so that the sum is 5?

Take a look at the chart on page 132, and you'll see all the possible outcomes when you roll two dice. Count up how many ways that you could roll a 2. Now count up how many ways you could roll a 5.

There's only one way to roll 2. Snake eyes — a 1 on Die A and a 1 on Die B. But there are four ways to roll 5. You could roll 1 on Die A and 4 on Die B; you could roll 2 on Die A and 3 on Die B; you could roll 3 on Die A and 2 on Die B; or you could roll 4 on Die A and 1 on Die B.

Looking at the chart, you can figure out the probability of rolling a particular number. If you count up the number of possible outcomes shown on the chart, you'll see that there are 36 possible outcomes.

Now count up how many ways you can roll a particular number. There are, for instance, six ways to roll a 7. The probability of rolling a 7 is 6 out of 36 or 6/36. That's the same as 1/6. So the probability that you'll roll a 7 is 1 out of 6.

Good information to know if you want to play craps in Vegas. But does it help you with the Monty Hall Problem?

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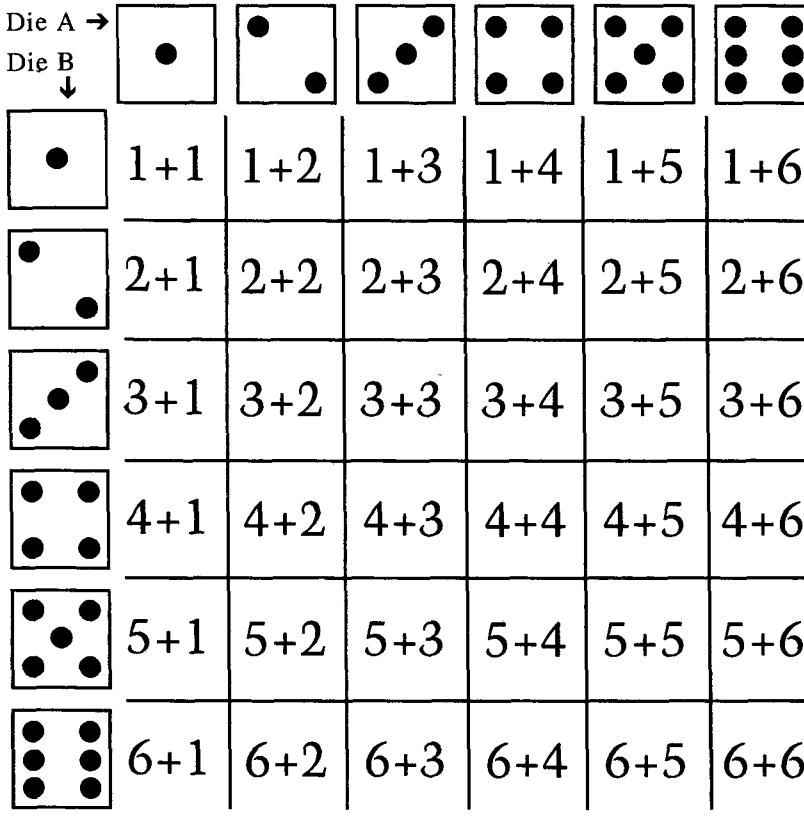

Chart Credit: Jason Gorski, courtesy of the Exploratorium

Return to the Monty Hall Problem

So what's the probability that you've chosen the right door? When Monty offers you a choice of three doors, the probability that you'd pick the right one is 1 out of 3 or 1/3. There are three doors and only one of them is right.

After Monty opens one door — one of the doors that does not hide the prize you want — you have a choice of two doors. If you wanted to count up the probability at this point, you might say: there are two doors and the prize is equally likely to be behind one as it is to be behind the other. So you might say that the probability that you've

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got the right door is 1 out of 2 or 1/2.

Unfortunately that just confirms the adage that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing and that counting is not as easy as it looks. Actually, at this point, the probability that you have the right door is still 1/3. But the probability that the prize is behind Door Number Two, the door you didn't choose, is 2/3.

How can that be? Well, that's exactly what Pat said when this problem was described to her at an Exploratorium brainstorming meeting. She didn't believe it, so she went home, sat down with her husband and three pieces of paper labeled 1, 2, and 3, and worked through all the possibilities.

First, suppose you decide not to switch. Table 1 below shows you the possibilities. If you don't switch, you win one time out of three.

Compare that to what happens if you always switch. If you choose to switch, you win two times out of three.

Experimentally, it's clear that probability favors switching. Of course, experimentation is not proof for a mathematician. But Pat and Paul aren't mathematicians. We won't attempt a rigorous mathematical proof, but we will take our discussion a little farther.

In an effort to help understand how opening a door could shift the odds, Pearl Tesler, a science writer at the Exploratorium, proposed this scenario. Suppose Monty starts out with one hundred doors and he asks you to choose one. After you make your choice, he opens a door, shows you that the trip to Hawaii isn't behind that one, and offers to let you switch. You say no, and he opens another door. No tropical vacation behind that one, either. Do you want to switch?

Monty continues like this —

TABLE 1

Door hiding prize	Your choice	Monty opens	You stay put and
1	1	2 or 3	win
1	2	3	lose
1	3	2	lose

TABLE 2

Door hiding prize	Your choice	Monty opens	You switch and
1	1	2 or 3	lose
1	2	3	win
1	3	2	win

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opening door after door after door —until he is down to two doors: the door you chose and one other door. Do you want to switch? Or do you want to bet that you made the right choice the first time? Under these circumstances, most people would switch, figuring that they couldn't have chosen the right door out of one hundred possible choices.

How Much Is that Bet Worth?

We started this discussion with Las Vegas and we're now coming back to the topic central to that town of neon lights and rich possibilities. Any discussion of probability leads inevitably to gambling.

But you don't have to go to Las Vegas to gamble. A little closer to home, Paul and Pat can gamble on the California Lottery. There are various games in the lottery, but we decided to analyze SuperLotto Plus, in which the jackpot has ranged from $7 million to more than $50 million. To play, you pick five numbers from 1 to 47 and one MEGA number from 1 to 27 and match them to the numbers drawn by the Lottery every Wednesday and Saturday. On Saturday, August 11, 2001, when we were writing this article, the SuperLotto Plus Jackpot was 14 million dollars.

So what's the probability of plunking down a dollar and winning the 14 million? Well, you have 1 chance in 47 of choosing a correct number with the first number you pick. With your second number, you have 1 chance in 46 of choosing the right number. (You've already chosen a number, so you've eliminated one from the possibilities.) With the third number, you have 1 chance in 45. And so on through the first five numbers. Then you have 1 chance in 27 of choosing the right number for the MEGA number.

To get the probability that you'll get all the numbers right and in the right order, you multiply these independent probabilities together. So you get:

$$1/47 \times 1/46 \times 1/45 \times 1/44 \times 1/43 \times 1/27 = 1/4{,}969{,}962{,}360$$

That means there's about 1 chance in 5 billion that your numbers will come up and that they'll be in the order in which you chose them.

Fortunately, the order of the numbers doesn't matter. There are 5! (pronounced 5 factorial) or 5x4x3x2x1 ways to order 5 different numbers. That means there are 120 different ways to order the numbers. To get our improved odds, we

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multiply 1 chance in 5 billion by 120. This improves the odds to about 1 chance in 4×10^7 or one chance in 40 million.

The odds aren't good. But do we hear some optimists in the crowd saying "Hey, playing the game only costs a buck and if you win, you will win 14 million." So what do you think? Is it worth playing?

To calculate the value of a bet, you multiply the probability that you'll win by the value of the prize you'll win. If the jackpot is 14 million and the probability of winning is 1 in 40 million then the payoff is worth \$14 million/40 million = 0.35 dollar or thirty-five cents. Making the bet costs you a dollar. So it is not worth playing.

When the payoff reaches \$40 million, the bet is almost worthwhile. Not quite worthwhile, since you might have to split the pot with some other lucky soul!

But here's another possibility. There are about 40 million different number combinations. If the payoff goes above 40 million dollars, you could just buy tickets with all the possible combinations. That seems like a sure way of winning. If you have all the combinations, one of your combinations has to win.

But wait! There is a catch. (There is always a catch.) What if someone else shares your winning number? Then you get only half of the payoff, but you'd still be out the \$40 million you spent on tickets. And keep in mind: the payoff is spread over 20 years! There is also the possibility of error. If you miss a couple of combinations and one of them wins, you'll be out 40 million dollars! And the sheer magnitude of keeping track of 40 million cardboard squares boggles the mind. Better stick to a real job. (On the other hand, if you have 40 million to risk on the lottery, you don't need a real job!)

Visiting Vegas

Of course, the probabilities we calculate depend on the assumption of true randomness in the drawing of the lottery numbers, the fall of the dice at the craps table, and the calculations of the computer chip that generates random numbers in the slot machine. If supernatural forces intervene (in the form of superhuman control of the dice or the assistance of a lost soul trapped in a slot machine) then the odds we calculate are meaningless.

Though we know the odds and don't rely on the supernatural, Paul and Pat still play the games in Vegas now and then. Paul plays poker

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and doesn't lose too quickly. Being a keen observer of people actually helps him win a bit. Although he does live by one rule: "If you look around the poker table and can't spot the sucker then it must be you!"

Regarding gambling as a form of entertainment, Pat plays the nickel slots and gets into conversations with chain-smoking, gray-haired ladies who explain things to her. "The slots aren't paying today," says one. "You gotta play nine lines," says another. "You play three lines and you're throwing your money away."

Pat believes she's right — as gray-haired ladies so often are. If you play the nickel slots without supernatural assistance, you are certainly throwing your money away.

To learn more about Pat Murphy's science fiction writing, visit her web site at www.brazen hussies.net/murphy. For more on Paul Doherty's work and his latest adventures, visit www.exo.net/~pauld.

"Well, I've downloaded my mind into the computer, and the computer's hard drive into my brain. I'll be thinking a lot faster than before, and I won't give a hoot *what I think about."*

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Last month Esther Friesner regaled us with a tale of Texas that was at least half bull (if you catch my drift). Texas denizen Bill Spencer did not write the following story in response to Ms. Friesner's woolly and wild portrait of the Lone Star State, but it's interesting to read Mr. Spencer's portrait of a northeasterner seeking solace in nature with Ms. Friesner's story in mind.

Bill Spencer jokingly calls himself a recluse, but the Austin resident has been seen recently at social affairs such as his own wedding. His c.v. includes two of the most delightful novels of the 1990s, Résumé with Monsters *and* Zod Wallop. *The favorite writers of his youth include Raymond L. Ditmars and Frank W. Lane.*

The Essayist in the Wilderness

By William Browning Spencer

I HAD WON THE LOTTERY, the ultimate *deus ex machina*. My wife was stunned by our good fortune, disoriented and faintly miffed for she had always scoffed at my lottery tickets, explaining that a person was more apt to be bitten by a rattlesnake while plummeting to Earth in an airplane — "Do the math," she would say — than get that winning number.

I had won, we were rich, and I was very pleased with myself. I could see that Audrey still thought I was dead wrong, that lotteries were the opiate of the people, a game for probability-challenged chumps. However, had events demonstrated the rightness of Audrey's position, we would still be toiling in the English department at Clayton College, a dreary four-year diploma mill with a lovely campus, a mummified faculty, and a student body derived almost entirely from the Church of Christ contingent in certain small towns in Pennsylvania.

We had only settled on Clayton because it offered jobs for the both of us. Audrey had sacrificed the most for that berth. While I taught the

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glamor stuff, Shakespeare and Spenser and Renaissance poetry, my wife tried to introduce English grammar into the minds of adolescents raised on television and movies — minds that were very nearly immune to syntax.

It didn't take Audrey long to embrace our good fortune. Now we were free. A much smaller sum would have set us free; our desires were modest. We wanted to get away from the infernal ever-busy world, to find a quiet niche where we could read (the unalloyed pleasure of selfish reading, the decadence of perusing books and tossing them aside half read, the dirty thrill of reading novels of no critical merit whatever or old childhood treasures from which the narcotic of nostalgia could be slowly sucked) and, of course, to write.

We bought a house on twenty acres of land in a town beyond the reach of city commuters. We were far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife and spared the reinvented Main Street, the historical markers on every house, the hideous quaintness of the polished past. Our town was a little run-down; the unimaginative might even have found it ugly. We loved it.

We lined our rambling, three-story farm house with bookshelves throughout and furnished it with stuff foraged from neighborhood yard sales and junk shops (dressers, mirrors, end tables, a writing desk, a vast old sofa that was as good a representation of Queen Victoria in decline as any sofa I have ever seen).

Once settled, neither of us rushed into writing projects, although Audrey was by far the more industrious. One evening she read me a passage in which her nine-year-old self had accidentally been locked out of the summer house in Sag Harbor during a thunderstorm while her parents partied within. She had only been outside a short time, a minute perhaps before her absence was discovered, but it was time enough to get thoroughly wet and abandon a belief system that included loving parents. I thought it was a powerful piece, and I was impressed with the book's tentative title, *Spite*, which struck me as everything a memoir's title should be, forthright, unsparing, monosyllabic.

While I hadn't gotten so far as to conjure a working title or turn any of my thoughts into something as substantial as a paragraph of prose or some lines of poetry, I had spent considerable time deciding just what I intended to write, what genre I would inhabit. As a youth of fourteen, I had

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wanted to be a lyric poet, but I had failed at that early, discovering that my poetry repelled girls who had initially been drawn to me. In college I considered becoming a novelist, but I was no good at character and if by sheer perseverance I managed to create some sort of fictional personage, I didn't have a clue what to do with him, sending him lurching off down the street like Dr. Frankenstein's monster, inevitably parking him in a cafe or bar where he would talk interminably to some other sadly cobbled-together creature. Nope, not novels. I toyed with the idea of a memoir, but my past bored me. I had no wish to revisit it.

By a process of elimination, I was closing on my vocation. I was reading voraciously, ecstatically, and I had been at it for two months. I expected to find my blushing Muse in the next book that came to hand.

ONE NIGHT WE were both reading in the study when I heard a sharp intake of breath and looked up from my book to see Audrey staring wide-eyed in my direction. Her Henry James (*Washington Square*, if memory serves) was open on her lap. It was late, about eleven I would guess, and we sat at opposite sides of the room, each of us enclosed in the light of our separate lamps while the books that surrounded us were imbued with dusky mystery and an almost erotic sense of solace.

"Jonathan?" She slapped a hand to her breast as though assaulted by a sudden pain. I assumed she had been taken with some particularly powerful passage and was so expressing herself, for we were both guilty of melodrama in our passion for literature, but then she toppled forward, the book (a Modern Library with those almost transparent pages, those tight thickets of immortal prose) fluttering as she fell.

I marked my place and rushed to her aid. She lay sprawled on the carpet, her flowing blue robe in sweet disarray, her red hair gloriously unbound, as though she were a Victorian heroine felled by the news of her lover's death in a foreign land, the child within her still unknown to the inflexible society of her peers.

I bent down and taking her shoulders lifted her gently, turning her toward me. Did I say that Audrey is beautiful? When I read Jane Austen, I think of my wife, the logic of her cheekbones, the wit of her mouth, her unequivocal eyebrows.

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Her eyelids fluttered. "Jonathan?" She seemed incapable of anything else, her mouth open in amazement. Her chest heaved; she gasped. "I can't — I can't breathe."

A series of desperate phone calls revealed that the closest hospital was forty-five miles to the west but that a Dr. Bath would be willing to rouse himself from sleep and meet us at his office at the corner of Maple and Main, a mere five minutes from our home.

ROUNDISH WOMAN swathed in black fabric and wearing a nurse's white cap opened the door before I knocked. She bent forward and clutched Audrey's hand, drawing us both into the room and informing us that she was the doctor's wife. The room was like every doctor's waiting room I have ever seen, a coffee table strewn with old magazines, sofas pining for better days, and a harsh, sourceless light, the cruel illumination of purgatory.

Mrs. Bath left us on the sofa and went to fetch her husband. By now Audrey's face was red and her breathing was an agony of effort, shaking her small frame. A wheeze that made my ribs ache underlined her every inhalation.

Mrs. Bath returned with her husband, a stout, balding man. He shook my hand and said, "Yes, I am Dr. Bath. And this is your wife, the emergency?"

We both looked at Audrey, and I said, "Yes." The doctor wore a black suit and seemed disappointed, although whether this was because Audrey didn't look like emergency enough or looked like more emergency than he had bargained for, I couldn't tell.

Mrs. Bath helped Audrey up from the sofa where she was hunched forward in private communication with her lungs. Flanked by the doctor and his wife, Audrey was led past the reception desk toward the hall. Something in their progress, their tentative exit, put me in mind of two skaters guiding a novice across the ice.

I waited on the sofa while the doctor and Mrs. Bath attended my wife. I shuffled through the magazines on the coffee table, seeking something to occupy my mind, but I was certain I didn't want to read anything about infants or celebrities or health or crafts, and I was growing irritated with this foraging when — I found my Muse!

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My Muse resided within the unlikely confines of a thin, battered paperback entitled *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by someone named Annie Dillard. I noted a number of laudatory blurbs on the back and began reading. I had no premonition, no shiver of recognition on opening the book, that my inspiration would lie within.

I was instantly intrigued. So engrossed was I that I did not notice Audrey standing over me, flanked again by the doctor and his wife. All three were smiling. Audrey's smile was weak, relieved more than celebratory, but it lifted my heart.

I wrote a check for $85 while the doctor talked. He was more animated now, hearty and pleased with himself. "Your wife, she has the spider bite!" he said. "Right there on the ankles. Hah! Or maybe the bee sting or a, what you call, centepeeder? Not everyone are allergic. Most, they just say, 'Ow!' and forget about it." Here the doctor shrugged to indicate a cavalier attitude toward such attacks. "But your wife, she has the reactions, so I give her the shot and these pills, samples while the drugstore does not open. Problems? You must call."

I asked Mrs. Bath if I might have the paperback I was holding in my hand, and she sold it to me for five dollars, which seemed a little steep. I didn't haggle.

Driving back to our home, slowly, keeping an eye out for nocturnal creatures that might race from the surrounding woods and hurl themselves beneath our wheels, I could not contain my enthusiasm.

"I know what I'm going to write," I told Audrey. She turned her head, her cheek flat against the backrest, her red hair matted in thick ribbons. She was clearly exhausted, and she regarded me with blue eyes that were uncharacteristically blank. Ordinarily, Audrey would have expressed delight, urged me to elaborate, but she wasn't up to it that night. I understood, and I should have left it till morning, but I couldn't contain the good news.

"I am going to write essays! Nature essays. You know, thoughtful pieces in which nature serves as a sort of jumping off place for larger topics. Caterpillar-to-butterfly stuff about transformation, a little something from Ovid or Hazlitt or Burton thrown in. 'The world is but a school for inquiry,' after all. So. We've got a classroom in our own backyard! Our property has woods, a pond, a small creek. I haven't seen the creek yet, but

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the real estate agent said it was there, no reason to doubt her. And here we are in April, everything coming alive. 'When that Aprile with his shoures soote the droghte of March hath perced to the roote,' that sort of thing."

Audrey rolled her eyes, snorted derisively.

"What?" I asked.

My wife exhaled (the tiniest trace of a wheeze still there) and looked at me as though I'd just announced that I intended to run for President.

"What? I think the essay is the perfect vehicle for my temperament and — "

"Nature, Jonathan. What do you know about nature?"

"Well." I was caught off balance by this attack, so unlike my wife. I realized later that Audrey was speaking in the immediate aftermath of a life-threatening encounter with a tiny piece of nature. No wonder she was unenthusiastic regarding my new allegiance. At the time, however, I was hurt.

"I believe I have a layman's knowledge of the natural world," I said, hating the prissy tightness in my throat.

"No one would ever describe you as an outdoors person," Audrey said.

"I don't believe I need to be climbing mountains or rafting down the Amazon to write about nature."

"No," Audrey said. "I don't suppose so. But you need...." She paused. She stretched the tip of her tongue to touch her upper lip, a habit she had when looking within, and one I generally found endearing. She smiled. "Name three trees."

"What?"

"Come on, name three trees. That's an easy one."

Yes, an easy one, insultingly so, beneath reply. Mistaking my silence for ignorance, her smile enlarged, so I snapped back, "Juniper, Christmas, Mimosa!" and she continued to grin, as though she had won somehow, and I found myself fretting that juniper might be, technically, more of a shrub than a tree. But I wasn't going to have my Muse belittled by continuing the conversation. I changed the subject.

"I'm glad you are all right," I said.

"Not as glad as I am," she said, which probably meant nothing, but it felt like a rebuke. I drove the rest of the way in silence, and when we pulled into our yard, Audrey said, "All out for Walden."

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* * *

In spite of my wife's sarcasm, I was convinced that the essay was the form for me. For one thing, I was wealthy. With wealth came leisure, and leisure encouraged reflection. It occurred to me that one of the great charms of the essay was this conveyed sense that its author had all the time in the world. The authors of essays drifted in a fog of indolence, contemplating objects and events, pursuing literary allusions with scholarly languor. The average reader, hustling to get his car to the Jiffy Lube on his lunch hour, could only dream of some faraway retirement when time would cease to flog him with errands and obligations. To read an essay was to enter a world of literary and philosophical loafing, to wade in that slow river of time. Readers of essays could, for the span of the piece, escape their deadline days.

I had every confidence that I could give the reader his money's worth in reflection, but I thought I might have trouble with the nature part. While I didn't feel I was as ill-equipped for the job as Audrey believed, it is true I never had warmed to nature as a child. I never had an urge to climb a tree, own a turtle, look under a log, or catch a fish. I wasn't immune to the beauty of autumn, with hills transformed by garish yellows and reds, and spring, with its thousand shades of green, was a wonder of renewal, no doubt about it, but I didn't wish for any deeper connection. In fact, I had always kept a cool distance from the natural world, which I perceived as deadly and erratic, the rotting rabbit by the side of the road, festering with maggots, the yellow jackets that buzzed around the picnic table, climbing down the throat of the open Coke bottle.

NATURE COULD BE hostile, as Bob, of Bob's Bug and Vermin Blasters, reminded me. Audrey and I had decided to purge the house of bugs to prevent a second occurrence of that harrowing night, and Bob's Bug and Vermin Blasters was the only local establishment for such services.

Bob was a large man outfitted in olive drab camouflage, his pants stuffed into gray rubber boots. He had laughed, an incredulous, seal-like sound muffled by his mustache, when Audrey expressed her reservations regarding the contents of the canister that he intended to spray inside and outside the house.

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"Yes, ma'am," he said. "This here is deadly poison. That's a fact. Might be you want something organic." His eyes, bright blue and winking out from under bushy eyebrows, showed deep amusement. "Just sprinkle some garlic on the bastards. Or say a prayer. You know what the word *organic* means to a bug? It means *dinner*."

Bob made more seal sounds. Audrey turned and left the room without saying anything, and I accompanied Bob on his rounds, watched him go through the house, crawling under the kitchen sink, squirting death behind the refrigerator, in the cupboards, along the baseboards. When he headed off to the basement, I left him to his work and went outside. I sat on the porch reading some more of the Dillard book until Bob came outside and I tagged along again, watching him as he drilled deep holes into the cinder block and squirted poison into the holes. All the while, he supplied me with a wealth of anecdotal material about his trade. "Ants are mad about electricity," he said. "I've known them to eat the insulation off wires. I've found dead clumps of them in air-conditioning units and around electrical terminals. All the lights go off in your house, it could be ants feeding their addiction. And the thing about ants, the thing about a lot of bugs, is they don't give a goddam whether they live or die. That's an edge they got in the war. And you might think war's an exaggeration for it, but I've been in the business a long time, and war's the word. And there ain't a clear winner yet."

When Bob had finished with the house, he said, "I'll just mosey around the property, see if there's any problems brewing, maybe a big hive. There's a hell of a lot to be said for a preemptive strike." I watched him set out toward the woods, the canister balanced on his shoulder, an American warrior, and I went back in for dinner.

Audrey was sitting in the kitchen, her elbows planted on the table, a book open before her. I looked over her shoulder and experienced a shock. She was reading *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. I just stood and stared until she sensed my presence, turned around and looked up.

"What?"

"I thought you hated Hemingway?"

Audrey looked a little sheepish, then defiant. "He has hardly any commas."

I raised my eyebrows in query.

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"I can't handle commas right now," she said. "I can't breathe on a comma. And Henry James...all those commas. I nearly fainted trying to catch my breath."

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded my head and moved on to the refrigerator. In retrospect, I guess it was a warning I should have heeded. But retrospect and two dollars and fifty cents will get you a latte at Starbucks.

THAT NIGHT I was reading in bed when I heard an engine cough into life. I knew it wasn't someone making off with our Camry; that would have been a different sound entirely. This was the distinctive rattle of a diesel engine in need of a tune-up. I slipped out of bed, taking care not to wake Audrey, and went to the window in time to see red taillights curve down the driveway and disappear past the trees. I realized that I had just seen Bob leaving in his truck. I had forgotten entirely about Bob. I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes past midnight. I marveled at such dedication. Say what you will about country folk, their work ethic is admirable, an example for the rest of us.

I returned to the bed and decided that I'd better get some sleep myself. Tomorrow I planned to confront nature, armed with a notepad, a pencil, and a will to revel in her wonders, no matter how stony the soil, how overgrown the path.

As I moved toward the bed, Audrey stirred in her sleep, stretched and turned on her side, rolling the bedsheet with her and pulling it up past her feet. I bent to pull it back down and noticed something on her ankle, a pale green patch of light. I leaned closer. Between her ankle and her heel, an area of skin the size of a quarter glowed with the yellow-green luminosity of a night clock's hands. As I studied this glowing spot, it dimmed and disappeared. *Odd*, I thought. I pulled the covers over her feet, resolving to mention it in the morning. I remembered that the spider or mite or whatever had launched its assault on her ankle. No doubt this was a related effect, nothing to worry about. Still, it might signify the onslaught of infection. Audrey might not be aware of the phenomenon if it only manifested itself while she slept. Another consultation with Dr. Bath might be in order.

I slept poorly and dreamed that I was back at Clayton teaching a class

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on biology, and Francis Bacon had come to demonstrate to my students just how to stuff a chicken with snow, this being the famous experiment that had led to his death by pneumonia. I found myself disliking Bacon, who was pompous and rude and wearing an ugly blue dress, and I asked him to leave and he took a swing at me with the chicken, but then the dream's logic broke down, and the chicken, while still looking like a chicken, was much larger, was, in fact, my old high school drama teacher, Mrs. Unger, and I woke up. It took me half an hour to get back to sleep, and the sleep I gleaned was shallow, the dregs of rest.

I WASN'T FEELING entirely fit in the morning, but I probably would have remembered to mention the ankle business after my first cup of coffee. Audrey, no more of a morning person than I, lumbered down from the bathroom where her morning ablutions had taken an inordinately long time. I looked at her and was...well, puzzled.

We men know that sometimes the women in our lives will look different. I can't speak for all men, but I know that I have an uncanny sensitivity to this new-look thing. I become instantly alert, like a deer in the forest on hearing the snap of a twig. New hair style? New lipstick, new eye shadow? Is this alteration for my benefit? Is a compliment in order? It can be a panicky moment. Not all new looks are planned or, if planned, executed with success. If some new hair style is, in Audrey's opinion, a great disaster, or if — an early learning experience — she has simply slept funny on her hair, producing a fuzzy, disheveled effect, a compliment can precipitate tears.

I was more baffled than usual. Audrey looked like Audrey and then again, quite different. She seemed to have a higher forehead, a just-scrubbed look, a nakedness of feature and a new bluntness to her gaze.

Audrey is very intuitive, and we have been married for ten years — we were married just after we got our undergraduate degrees — so she sensed my confusion.

"Eyebrows," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"I shaved off my eyebrows. I was looking at myself in the mirror, and, I don't know, they looked superfluous."

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I had one of those revelations which, despite several bad experiences, I always share. "Like commas!" I said.

"What?"

"Well, eyebrows are sort of like commas, and you've been having this thing about commas, not liking them."

"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard," Audrey said.

"Is it?" I jumped up, ran into the living room, and returned with *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. I plopped the book down in front of her and flipped the pages.

"Okay, I'm crazy. What's this?" Every comma had been sliced with a short red line, that little mincing flourish that is the copy editor's delete symbol. There were a lot of red deletes, more than I would have expected in Hemingway.

Audrey stood up suddenly and snatched the book from the table, clutching it to her chest. "A marriage is not an invitation to abuse another person's privacy."

"It's just a book; it's not your diary."

Audrey sniffed. "And I suppose that *The Great Gatsby* is just a book?"

She had me there. My copy of *The Great Gatsby* is a very personal, passionately annotated book, and I had thrown — I winced to remember — a fit when I found Audrey reading it.

"You're right," I said. "I'm sorry. I'm a lout. I don't know how you put up with me."

Audrey is not one to hold a grudge, and we hugged each other and kissed.

I drank the rest of my coffee standing up. I set the mug down, grabbed my backpack, and moved to the door. "Today's the big day, off into the wilderness to bag some inspiration."

"Yes, I can see. Good luck." Audrey wiggled her fingers at me.

Then I was out the door and walking across the tall grass toward a pale meadow and the vibrant green of the trees beyond. I was a little nervous, so much seemed to ride on this venture. Did I really have the stuff it took to be an essayist?

I had made preparations for the journey (journey may be too extravagant a word for an outing that doesn't leave home). I wore heavy khaki pants, hiking boots, a long-sleeved flannel shirt, a backpack containing a

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first-aid kit, a packed lunch (baloney sandwich, apple, cheese), a flashlight, a spade, two jars for specimens, several balls of twine, my notepad and pencils, a pocket knife, a compass, and a bottle of spring water.

I entered the meadow. The straw-colored grass reached to my waist. I ignored the disquiet that came with a sudden sense of vulnerability. The pale blue sky loomed over me, tattered scraps of cloud moving slowly, animated by the same wind that stirred the grass. *Waves of amber,* I thought, pleased with the metaphor, then chagrined, realizing that the image wasn't original.

But I was getting the hang of this, marching along, my initial trepidation eased by the comforting weight of the sun on my neck and shoulders.

The gods lie in wait for the overly confident, and just as I was loosening up, living in the moment, something exploded in front of me with a great whirring and fury, a brown blur aimed at my head, and I stumbled backward and fell, my heart banging around in my chest.

I scrambled back up and saw a bird flapping its way to the clouds. I remembered a movie I had seen in which hunters with shotguns and dogs had hunted birds — were they called wrens? That doesn't seem quite it — in a meadow like this, the birds blasting out of the ground with the same *whup-whup-whup* sound that I had just experienced.

I was briskly heading back to the house as I thought this, my rational mind trying to retake the higher ground. I scolded my inner coward. *Are you going to let a blasted bird send you running?*

I continued on course to the house, but I managed, by an act of will, to veer right and down a hill toward the small pond and the clump of sentinel willows — there's another tree, Audrey — and by the time I reached the muddy, weed-strewn bank, I was breathing heavily but relatively calm again. Thoreau got a lot of mileage out of a pond, and I saw no reason why I couldn't squeeze some fine writing out of my own pond. Unfortunately, up close, its charms diminished. The pond had no precise boundary, at least not where I came upon it. Green weeds marched into the water which was filmed with a yellow-green scum. When I stirred this with a stick, the end of the stick came away with fleshy, dripping blobs of goo. My research brought me too close to the edge, and I was suddenly ankle deep in black, stinking mud, flailing my arms to keep from falling

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forward, yanking my hiking boots free with rude popping noises while a primal sound of disgust came unbidden from my throat. Small gnats buzzed up in a peppery cloud and rushed at my mouth, nose, and eyes with suicidal abandon (*they don't give a goddam whether they live or die*, I heard Bob saying).

That did it for the day, and I headed back to the house, depressed and angry with myself. I found Audrey on the porch in the rattan chair. Her head was down as she wrote furiously on a legal pad, and when I hailed her, she looked up, smiled abstractedly, and returned to her writing. Her industry seemed a reprimand.

I DIDN'T GIVE UP, didn't let nature win the game in the first encounter. Every day I would arise, drink my coffee in the kitchen, kiss Audrey on her forehead — there was something endearing in her eyebrowless state, a subtext speaking volumes on humanity's restless experimental spirit — and I would set off into the wilderness.

I grew comfortable with the pond and the meadow. I was no longer spooked by birds or apt to let mud demoralize and defeat me. I sprayed myself with liberal amounts of insect repellant — Audrey said I smelled like poisonous oranges, even after a shower — and the hordes of hovering midges, mosquitoes, and gnats kept their distance. I grew less fastidious. My gag reflex relented. I could pick a tick off my sleeve with nonchalance and expertly crush it between my fingernails, flicking it away. If I thought that the blood on my fingers might be my own, siphoned from me by the creature, I felt only a satisfied sense of revenge, no horror-induced queasiness.

But I was troubled. Despite this new ease, I found no subject for my essay, nothing that spoke my name. I began to have doubts that I ever would, and I was trying to escape an unsettling conclusion: Nature was boring. Turtles sat on logs soaking up the rays of the sun, as listless and devoid of interest as a pile of dirty socks. They'd sit so maddeningly still that I'd be compelled to hurl rocks at them until they showed some life by flopping into the pond and disappearing. And that, in itself, wasn't wildly entertaining. Nature's infinite variety was beginning to look like a rut. If you thought about it, even the seasons, rolling around every year in the

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same damned order (spring, summer, fall, winter, spring, summer, fall, winter), suggested a dearth of imagination. The pond was stupefied with routine. Fish endlessly rose to dimple the pond's demeanor while small, sunflower-seed creatures with wire-thin legs skipped pointlessly across the water's surface. Bugs whirred over the weeds; small round birds darted down from the willow trees to eat them again and again and again.

I wasn't ready to give up, but I was having my doubts, my crisis of faith. I decided that the woods, still unexplored, might be my salvation.

I had been reluctant to enter the woods. There is a primal fear of nature when it closes ranks. Dante's dark wood is a place where only the lost find themselves. Who would seek it out?

The night I resolved to enter the woods the next morning was the same night that Audrey shared several pages of her manuscript with me. She was burning with the fever of creation, moving around the living room as she read, gesturing dramatically with her free hand. Her hair, cropped short with a scissors and wild abandon, was a red, spiky flag of rebellion that would have won my heart had she not already owned it.

It became apparent, as Audrey read these fresh pages, that her physical appearance didn't mark the full extent of her experimentation. She had discovered a new approach to the memoir, a surreal language that captured the dissociative state produced by abuse.

I confess I couldn't follow it all. I did not recognize all of the words (Latin? Joycean synthesis?) and the narrative was disjointed. As soon as Audrey finished reading, she flopped down on the sofa and began writing furiously on her legal pad, not waiting for my response. I didn't disturb her or try to take the loose pages from her so that I could conduct a more careful reading. I doubt she would have let me. She almost never relinquished a work-in-progress for my scrutiny. I got up and went into the study where I wrote down the sentence that I had committed to memory, but even as I wrote the words, I distrusted their accuracy. This is what I wrote: "My brood brother committed the sin of threes and had no smoothness so that I wished he had splintered into *hoosith hostoth* [?] and I was shamed by my parent wheel and uttered an asymmetrical harmony that generated sadness back to the last *falofath* [?] where the latent ones hooted and sent their sound-scents throughout the burrow."

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You can understand why I can't vouch for the accuracy of my transcription. But I think that does capture the tone.

I set out with a will the next morning, spurred on by a new competitive spirit. I didn't want Audrey to leave me in her literary dust.

I tied the free end of the string around the trunk of a tree and let the ball unravel as I entered the woods, stepping gingerly over logs and avoiding the larger, more formidable clumps of vegetation. Far from the menace I had imagined, I felt an immediate sense of serenity. Light fell through the overhead canopy of leaves, dappling the mossy ground with green, shifting shapes. Aside from a few birds scraping around in the bushes and the faraway chittering of an insect or bird or frog, there was a sweet, almost reverent hush. I inhaled the rich scent of earthy decay and the green life that fed on it.

I was pleased with myself for thinking up the ball-of-twine trick. I could simply follow the string back, winding it around the cardboard core as it returned me to the meadow. I had several balls of string, so I could easily extend my range by tying the end of one to the beginning of the next. And, as a failsafe measure, I had a compass and had ascertained on the map that I could march east for less than a mile and discover the dirt road that ran parallel to my property and that would lead me back to my house.

I expected that days, perhaps weeks, would be needed to scout these woods as methodically as I had explored the pond and meadow, but on my first day I found the creek and, following it northward, encountered a clearing and the creatures that were to be my subject, creatures so fascinating, so complex in their behavior, that they promised a whole book of essays.

I had come upon the clearing at midday, stepping into full sunlight from under the arch of a fallen tree, dazed, delighted, charmed. My creek, which had seemed, in the shadow of the forest, rather too dark and slippery for close inspection, was transformed. Now as lively and lovely as something from a fairy tale, it ran glittering through the middle of this verdant swale.

I proceeded to unpack my lunch and eat it, sitting on the green grass and smiling at my surroundings. Having been disappointed by my meadow and its forlorn pond, I had lowered my expectations, and this clearing,

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with its picture-book beauty, was a fine surprise, a reward, perhaps, for pushing on. I quoted Rilke to the air: "The earth is like a child that knows poems."

While eating my lunch, I became aware of a steady low drone that filled the air. The sound was like nothing I had heard before. Most of nature's noises confirmed my belief that nature was just going through the motions: the repetitive *Whatever, Whatever, Whatever* of a bird that had lost its mind or the mechanical buzz of thousands of insects in thrall to a numbing need to procreate. But the sound that filled my ears in that clearing carried a profound emotional content, as though all the inhabitants of a great monastery were mourning the loss of paradise.

N FINISHING my lunch, I wadded up the paper bag and thrust it into my backpack. In my forays into the wilds, I had been delighted to find that this action was reflexive. I am sure no author of nature essays litters.

I had the instincts for my calling. I now employed those instincts to locate this poignant chant that so intrigued me. At first the sound seemed generalized, permeating the air, but I determined that it came from the creek, more specifically from that portion of the creek that disappeared into a thicket of squat shrubs and crooked trees brandishing new, pale-green leaves.

Carefully, not wishing to make any disturbance that would alert the maker of the sound, I pushed through thorny underbrush, crawling on my hands and knees like a soldier behind enemy lines.

I could not have come upon them from a better angle had I planned it knowing their location. I peered from behind a screen of leafy vines and was rewarded with my first view of the crayfish, perhaps fifteen of them scurrying in and out of their burrows on the opposite bank.

I did not know, then, that they were crayfish. Later that evening I called Harry Ackermann, and he supplied me with the name. Harry taught biology at Clayton and had been doing so for many decades. I caught him at home, and he was in a hurry to get back to his bridge game where the possibilities for a grand slam invested his voice with an excitement I had never heard before (dear God, how our lives narrow in the home stretch).

I described the creatures and would have supplied what I knew of their

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habits from this first encounter, but Harry cut me off. "They're not insects," he said. "They are crustaceans, crayfish. That's the only freshwater animal that fits your description. That armor you are describing is an exoskeleton. The — " I could hear someone hollering in the background, a shrill female voice that I recognized as belonging to old Dean Winfrey Podner, a lesbian according to student legend, which I found fanciful, for it required thinking of the dean in sexual terms. "Look, I've got to go," he said and hung up.

I watched my crayfish all that afternoon, retreating only when I became aware of the sinking sun and realized I'd be making my way through the woods in the dark if I didn't call it a day.

Those hours of observation on that first day were strewn with epiphanies. My Muse hugged herself for joy and sang within my head.

The sad hum that filled the air was clearly generated by the crayfish who vibrated in a minor key as they scuttled over the bare clay soil, diving into holes in the bank, leaping in and out of the bright water of the stream.

Sometimes two crayfish would encounter each other, hug, their bodies shivering more rapidly while their antennae waved wildly. Whether this entwining was sexual or served some other function, I couldn't determine. Later I learned that this activity had to do with enlisting other members in what I came to call a *meld*, intending to seek out the proper term at a later date.

Before leaping into the water, the crayfish would remove parts of their armor — what Harry called their exoskeletons — revealing smooth flesh, white as toothpaste, that boiled with tiny tentacles. I would have liked to discuss this removable exoskeleton with Harry and would have broached the subject on the phone had his manner been less abrupt. Was this common to crustaceans, this ability to doff their exoskeletons? I was almost certain that other creatures couldn't do this. Turtles couldn't shed their shells and snails...well, maybe snails could. I mean, that's what slugs are, right?

That evening, when I arrived home, I found Audrey working zealously in the neglected vegetable garden by the side of the house. Neither of us had ever thought to resuscitate this garden, hadn't spoken of it. Audrey didn't like gardens of any kind and had hinted at unpleasant experiences

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with vegetables in her past, but that evening her face was streaked with black dirt, and her shaved head shone with honest sweat — so few women have the bone structure to carry off a shorn look; Audrey does — and she smiled at me with the pride of a hard day's labor done and, turning away, hefted her hoe again and had at the weeds. I didn't tell her about my crayfish. I wanted to surprise her with the essay.

I entered the house and went straight for the kitchen where I grabbed an apple and a box of crackers. Then it was off to the study and to work. I began my essay:

> We are human and we think in human terms. Draw a line from a stone to a star, from a dinosaur bone to a dead ant, and wherever the lines intersect, there lies the human heart. Are we hopelessly self-referential or does the world truly speak to us?
>
> It is easy to relate to those clear similarities, those echoes of our own mortal condition. The gorilla in his cage induces guilt when we look into his eyes. We see ourselves. The dead raccoon induces the same guilt when, at the wheels of our automobiles, we speed past its carcass, tossed negligently to the side of the road. We see our own unhappy ends. But what of smaller, more elusive creatures whose suffering is largely hidden from us? What of the low moan of little things? Can that really be grief we hear or is it an accident, harmonies with another purpose that fall upon our human ears and take the shape of sadness? I speak of the lonesome song of the crayfish, that song that the wind carries to us, that sound that seems encoded with loss and despair.

I was very pleased with that beginning, so pleased that I couldn't continue. Art should never be hurried, particularly the essay with its obligatory andante. Besides, I needed more familiarity with my subject, more detail to support my reflective voice.

As the weeks went by I was reminded of the danger of confusing the metaphor with what it illustrates. I was so fascinated by these crayfish that I often lost the essayist in the amateur naturalist.

But I think I always regained the higher ground, and, in all humility, I think these passages demonstrate that:

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When I witness crayfish melding, generally in twelves or nines, more rarely in sixes, I am always amazed at how they fold into a completely new organism. The mega-crayfish seems to defy its origins, to heroically turn its back on the past. Single crayfish eat their exoskeletons before the meld, knowing there is no going back, demonstrating a selflessness that human societies might find admirable.

The first time I observed a mega-crayfish I had come upon it after the meld. I thought I was seeing a different animal entirely, although not one I was familiar with. The mega-crayfish comes in a variety of shapes, and this one looked something like a cat-sized spider except that it had a great many more legs than a spider and moved by collapsing a number of legs and falling in that direction, creating an odd, rollicking form of locomotion. This one dove into the water and returned with a frog which, I assumed, it was going to eat. Instead, it took the frog apart, peeling the skin back and plucking out various organs which it handed to the mendicant crayfish surrounding it. This was unpleasant to watch, since the frog continued to struggle throughout the operation, and the mega-crayfish performed the dissection with slow, finicky care. I expected the waiting crayfish to devour the morsels they had received from the mega-crayfish, and perhaps they did, but they did this out of my sight, disappearing into their holes with their treasures.

After the skeleton had been dismantled and carried away, when the frog was nothing more than a sheath of mottled skin, the mega-crayfish offered this last remnant to the last waiting crayfish, who took the skin, donned it like a Halloween cape, and dashed toward his hole with a fleetness that seemed powered by joy.

And then, of course, the mega-crayfish dismantled itself, pinching off its legs, unraveling its innards, and collapsing, finally, in a rubble of black exoskeleton, yellow blood and emerald guts. I expect this ritual has been observed by countless generations of country boys who give it no more thought than they might give to the birth of a calf or a bat caught in a sister's hair, but I must say, coming upon this gruesome spectacle with no warning of what was about to occur...it was unsettling, to say the least.

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> Perhaps it was the mega-crayfish's nature to tear itself apart; perhaps it was born to dissect and, lacking a subject, dissected itself. The analogy is easy, almost too easy: We human creatures deconstruct the universe and are left in the rubble of our fears, our mortality, our rags of faith.

I was pleased with that passage, and if Audrey had seen me at that moment, she might have said, as was her wont, "You look like you've just won the lottery."

But Audrey was nowhere around. She was probably upstairs reading in bed. I went outside and sat in the rocking chair and looked at the stars (Hopkins's "fire-folk sitting in the air") and thought that there were a lot of them in Pennsylvania, and I thought about how I might become very famous and hounded by fans. I might have to hire security guards or at least get a dog although I wasn't sure about getting a fierce dog because what if it began looking at me funny, started growling deep in its throat?

I sent the future marching, took a deep breath and rocked in the moment. I noticed that the night was very still. All the world's raucous frogs were silent, not a peep.

AS THE DAYS continued to pass, the exploits of my crayfish kept feeding my essay, and it grew to an unwieldy size. It was beginning to show its ignorance, by which I mean that my lack of scientific knowledge regarding these crustaceans was becoming a problem. No doubt there was a scientific term for what I called a meld. And what was occurring when two crayfish fought and the loser erupted in flames? The power of the image suggested a host of wonderful references throughout history and literature, but if I knew the mechanism — some volatile chemical released in defeat? — I could speak with more authority, send a telling anecdote or literary reference straight to the heart of the matter.

I needed to read up on crayfish. My decision was made on a Thursday evening after dinner. Scanning the phone book, which contained four counties and was still thinner than a copy of *The New Yorker*, I discovered

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— I confess I was surprised — a library in our very town. I thought it might still be open.

The parking lot was empty and dark, and the library, a small, shed-like building, appeared abandoned, although a closer inspection revealed a pale gleam of yellow light edging from beneath the window's drawn shade. I went to the door, turned the knob, and entered. An elderly woman sitting behind her desk jerked her head up as though she had been caught dozing.

"I can summon the police with a touch of a button, young man. There's nothing here but library fines, less than five dollars, not worth the loss of your freedom and good name."

I told her that I was seeking a book about crayfish.

"There are people who eat them," she said. Being a librarian, I suppose she felt obligated to contribute her knowledge on the subject.

"Not me," I said and waited for her to help with the search. She returned with two books, one entitled, *The Flora and Fauna of Western Pennsylvania* and the other a children's book entitled *What's Under That Rock?*

I checked out both books after filling out a library card application that was three pages long and expected me to know things like my mother's maiden name. I lied and got through it and made off with the books.

I intended to retire to the study and read these books immediately, but I saw the message light on the answering machine blinking, and so I pushed the play button and Audrey's voice jumped out. "Jonathan! When you get this, I'll be on my way to the coast with Dr. Bath and his wife. The quantum actualization of the brood wheel has come to us in a vision. It will bloom near San Clemente, and so we are on our way. These other manifestations are important, but they are not the blooming. You can be of use where you are. Please tend to my garden. We will meet again in celebration and the making of fine multiples."

I went into the kitchen, fumbled in the cupboards, and found the bottle of Gilbey's gin. It was my fault she'd left. I'd been neglecting her, lost in my damned essay about those damned crayfish. Neglected, she had fled into a crackpot religion. I should have seen it coming; the signs were

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there. I mixed the gin with a lemony diet drink that tasted awful. That was fine; I deserved it. Later I walked out into the yard and through the meadow and into the woods. I carried a flashlight and my backpack and trusted the familiarity of the route. There was a full moon, and I was drunk enough to fear no night thing.

I entered the clearing without incident, but I must have drifted from my habitual path, for a resilient sapling caught my leg and threw me to the ground. I turned my flashlight, and the beam revealed a silver rod growing out of the grass. I reached forward and touched the rod and as I gripped it, it began to slide down into itself. This wasn't at all like a sapling, and I studied the rod, pulling it up and then forcing it down again. It was a telescoping antenna. I retrieved my spade from the backpack and dug around the antenna, striking something hard. I brushed away the dirt to reveal a flat metal surface just under the ground. It took me well over two hours to unearth most of the truck's cab. The cab was full of dirt — and Bob. There was black dirt in Bob's mouth, black dirt in his eye sockets. His hands still clutched the wheel, ready to go but...*You lost the war,* I thought, a stupid thought. I was feeling a little ill, and it didn't help, my staring at the grass which grew undisturbed over what had to be the larger bulk of the truck. *How did you get there, Bob?*

I heard the new sound, a sound that did not resonate with loss but seemed joyous, playful, exuberant. I crawled into the thicket and took my station. The full moon provided more than enough illumination, but I could have seen them without it, for each crayfish was enveloped in a pale green glow. They were running in and out of a fine spray of mist, for all the world like children squealing and frolicking in the spray of a hose or water sprinkler. I recognized the source of the spray, Bob's deadly canister of poison. Three of the crayfish operated it from its dug-in position high in the bank, while a dozen or more raced in and out of the toxic mist.

As always, I was entranced, and I might have crouched there watching them for hours, but something moved behind them, a shadow that shifted and, for a moment, eclipsed the moon and flooded my heart with terror. I scrambled out of the thicket, stood upright, and ran.

I stumbled through the woods, crashing into trees, toppling over logs, but always up again and moving. The meadow left me unprotected; I imagined malevolent eyes watching me from above. I ran.

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I reached the porch as my stomach cramped. I eased myself down on the first porch step and blinked at the silvered grass, the meadow and the trees beyond. The spinning world wobbled to a stop as I caught my breath. Peace reigned; the stars were noncommittal and the breeze was warm and quick with the promise of spring. I glanced down at Audrey's garden and thought of going after her, but Audrey wouldn't like that. No, time would have to bring her back to me...*the fullness of time* (a phrase that seemed suddenly sinister; I saw this monstrous thing, bloated with the eons it had devoured).

No going after Audrey. Hadn't she charged me with the care of her garden? She had taken pains with this project, covering the ground with plastic sheets to protect the new shoots from the vicissitudes of the season. I stood up and regarded one of the sheets. I looked over my shoulder, but nothing was coming. I knelt down and peeled back the sheet and saw rows of neatly ordered little plants, white buds with blue.... No. My mind was forced to swallow the image, but it had no response ready-made. Indeed, my first reaction was to laugh abruptly, which really wasn't appropriate. What I saw were rows of little blue eyeballs, naked, unblinking, incredulous. I had never seen a garden that looked so very, very surprised.

I had no time to pursue that thought, for I turned again, prompted by a trumpeting roar that rattled my heart in its cage. The thing was silhouetted against the moon, its ragged wings outstretched, strange tentacles dangling from its black bulk, tentacles long enough to trail across the meadow as though trolling the amber waves.

I am locked in my room now, devising a plan or preparing to devise a plan or, perhaps, simply eating this bag of potato chips and reading. When all is said and done, I enjoy reading far more than writing. Not that I'm very fond of *The Flora and Fauna of Western Pennsylvania*. It has no pictures and it has that shiny paper that I associate with text books and the prose is almost impenetrable, and *you know what*? I'm an adult, and I don't have to read it if I don't want to. Hah.

Well, *What's Under That Rock*? is a great improvement. For one thing, it has pictures. A picture is worth a thousand words. There's a picture of a crayfish in this book.

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Something is on the roof...make that *in the attic*. The noise doesn't conjure a clear picture in my mind. Visualize a half dozen sailors, brawling while someone tortures a pig. No. I think you have to be here to fully appreciate this sound.

I keep looking at this drawing of a crayfish. *Cambarus bartoni*, that's its scientific name. It looks *exactly* like a tiny lobster. That's simple enough, isn't it? I mean, what kind of genius do you have to be to say, "Jonathan, those aren't crayfish. I don't know what the hell they are, but they aren't crayfish. *Crayfish look exactly like small lobsters*"? Is that so difficult?

Thanks a lot, Harry Ackermann. I hope your grand slam fizzled.

"When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions." You are so right, Will.

I'm just sick, really sick and disgusted. *And the essay is ruined, of course.*

COMING ATTRACTIONS

YES, WE PROMISED to bring you M. Rickert's "Leda" this month, but there were so-called "technical difficulties." Some joker took the cover painting for the story and hung it in the Met before we could make a copy of it to use on the cover. Sorry 'bout that. Soon as we can distract the guards, we'll bring you the story — it's well worth waiting for.

Speaking of stories worth waiting for...

Those of you who remember Dazzle the dog from Scott Bradfield's past stories will be happy to see him returning, although the grouchy mutt might not be too pleased himself, especially when he finds out what's in store in "Dazzle's Inferno." (Dazzle would rather sit this one out and wait for "Dazzle's Paradise," but don't worry, he'll show up.)

We also have a wonderful time-travel romance coming soon from a writer new to our pages. Ron Wolfe takes us on a terrific emotional rollercoaster ride in "Our Friend Electricity."

Next month we'll also be offering a chance for one reader to win a lifetime subscription — be sure to read the June editorial for details.

Let's repeat that: read next month's editorial for a chance to win a lifetime subscription to *F&SF*. And read next month's stories to stretch your imagination.

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CURIOSITIES

SMILE ON THE VOID, BY STUART GORDON (1983)

PUBLICIZED as "the stunning novel of the coming millennium," Stuart Gordon's 1983 novel uses the conceit of a fake biography to tell the story of Ralph M'Botu Kitaj, a "conjurer, arms dealer, visionary, con-man," and possible messiah — a man who disappears in plain view of 100,000 people on December 25, 1992, in Venice, but promises to return at the beginning of the new century.

As Big Lies go, *Smile on the Void* is one of the biggest: an engrossing tale supposedly penned by one of Kitaj's followers as he evades the authorities, Kitaj's religion having been banned in most countries. With wit and sincerity, the book relates the story of Kitaj's rocky path toward ultimate enlightenment. Just as any good biographer should, Gordon, through his narrator, grounds his novel in precise detail. The book convinces at a micro level even as it teases the reader with impossibilities at the macro level. Few books manage to get under the skin the way this one does, and few novels of any type — fantastical or mainstream — manage to portray a character as convincingly, flaws and all.

Due, I suppose, to the "new age" marketing of the book, *Smile on the Void* has been lumped in with *The Illuminatus Trilogy*, but the novel has much more to offer than jokey conspiracy theory paranoia. Ultimately, despite disavowals and disclaimers, Gordon tells the story of a difficult and heartfelt search for individual spirituality in our sometimes soulless consumer world.

—Jeff VanderMeer

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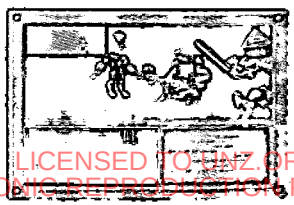

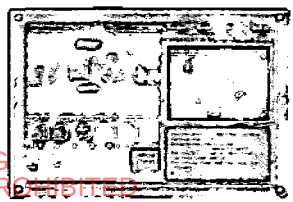

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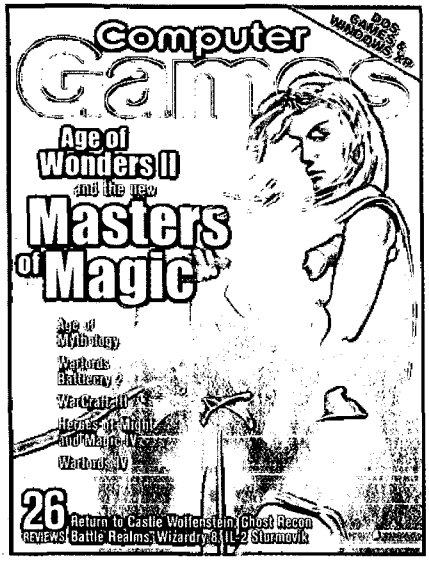

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